

NUMBER 137

NOVEMBER & DECEMBER 2015

COOK'S

ILLUSTRATED



Everything Turkey

How to Buy, Prep, Cook, Carve,
and Deal with Leftovers

Miso-Glazed Salmon

Better Flavor and Texture

Rustic Bread Stuffing

Light, Loose, and Crispy

Bringing Back Ground Beef Chili

Chicken Marsala

Not Supersweet

Taste Test: Cheap Extra-Virgin Olive Oils

New-Style Pecan Bars

Simpler and Nuttier



Modern Baked Alaska

Brussels Sprout Salads

Perfect Rack of Lamb

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Classic American Cookies

The most iconic American cookie, CHOCOLATE CHIP, features a toffee-flavored base punctuated with semisweet chips or chunks. Chewy oats and plump raisins distinguish OATMEAL RAISIN cookies from other drop cookies. The SNICKERDOODLE is a variation of a sugar cookie leavened with cream of tartar and baking soda. PEANUT BUTTER cookies are distinctively marked with a crosshatch pattern. CHOCOLATE SANDWICH cookies are crisp on the outside with a creamy filling inside. Crackly MOLASSES cookies owe their chewy texture to their signature ingredient. Buttery JAM THUMBPRINTS are defined by a center indentation filled with preserves. HERMITS are usually shaped like thick-cut biscotti but can also be formed into round drop cookies or chewy bar cookies. Popular in New York City, BLACK AND WHITE cookies have a delicate crumb flavored with lemon extract and a contrasting glaze. To make GRAHAM CRACKERS, you roll out a dough, score it, and dock it with small holes to prevent any rising when baked.



America's Test Kitchen is a very real 2,500-square-foot kitchen located just outside Boston. It is the home of *Cook's Illustrated* and *Cook's Country* magazines and the workday destination of more than three dozen test cooks, editors, and cookware specialists. Our mission is to test recipes until we understand how and why they work and arrive at the best version. We also test kitchen equipment and supermarket ingredients in search of products that offer the best value and performance. You can watch us work by tuning in to *America's Test Kitchen* (AmericasTestKitchen.com) and *Cook's Country from America's Test Kitchen* (CooksCountry.com) on public television.

THANKS GIVING

The Nun Study investigated the process of aging and the onset of Alzheimer's disease in 700 nuns from the School Sisters of Notre Dame. What made this study unusual was that in 1930 these same nuns, who were then in their twenties, were asked to write a brief autobiography setting out their reasons for entering the convent. The 2001 results found that those nuns who had expressed positive emotions in their 1930 write-ups, including love, hope, and gratitude, were much more likely to be alive and well 60 years later. The increase in life expectancy was as much as seven years.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites complained about the lack of food and water in the desert, about the manna, and about the dangers they faced from the Egyptians during the Exodus. Moses warned that an even bigger danger would be a lack of gratitude once they had arrived in the Promised Land. "When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them . . . do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.'"

The Carter family (the famous Depression-era singing group who sang "Keep On the Sunny Side") lived in an area of Virginia called Poor Valley where the ground was rocky and thin. (Next door was Rich Valley, which offered deep, loamy soil.) Even though some of their instruments were homemade—the harmonica was a comb with a piece of paper pulled tight across it—there was always music. The fiddler warmed up in the morning with "Pine Dreams," "Soap Suds," or "Johnny Put the Kettle On and We'll All Have Tea." For an impromptu Saturday night party, the furniture was carried out into the yard so folks would have a place to dance.

I live part-time in the Vermont equivalent of Poor Valley. Many of the town's 940 residents were born in their own homes. Sherman's Country Store is all penny candy, hot dogs, Pabst Blue Ribbon, and toilet paper. The firehouse is the center of the town's social life: Old Home Day carnival, chicken dinners, and barbecues. Some front porches are bric-a-brac dumping

grounds, featuring threadbare sofas that drip their stuffing. We still have a 300-head working dairy farm. The "honey truck" is often seen going up and down Main Street on its way to spray liquid manure on a corn or hay field. We offer a weigh-in station for big game right next to the derelict gas pumps, which feature a sign reading, "Regular, \$8.30/gal"—a local joke that keeps tourists from stopping.

Right up the road is Rich Valley, a well-known Vermont hamlet with a golf course, a well-stocked country store populated by more New Yorkers than Vermonters, antique stores, a half-dozen postcard-perfect inns, a summer stock theater, a kitchen equipment outlet, and an outdoors farmers' market.

Just last weekend, someone asked me why I live in Poor Valley instead of the richer town to the north. Our town is a pretty town, a long strip of valley with a high ridge of rugged Vermont mountains on one side and low hills running down to New York State on the other, but it has its rough edges, like the double-wide trailer just north of town with the refrigerator in the front yard. It's a small town where folks volunteer at the drop of a hat, whether it's for the rescue squad, the firehouse, or to run the French fry booth at the annual carnival. Yet gossip is the town's currency. There is no shortage of feuds, slights, and jealousies. And our town is no stranger to tragedy—logging accidents and worse. Some residents have already erected their own tombstones in the cemetery by Main Street in public acceptance of the inevitable.

The reason to live in such a town is gratitude. A hard life is balanced by the joy of life. Tragedy is offset by community. Anger is suppressed with forgiveness. Stupidity is upended with laughter. In Rich Valley, many are proud of their success. In Poor Valley, folks are proud of their town.

Abraham Lincoln set aside a day in November to celebrate Thanksgiving. The Civil War—"the lamentable



Christopher Kimball

strife," in Lincoln's words—had devastated this country, and he urged all citizens to pursue a course of "humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience," looking to the Almighty Hand for the full "enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union." He reminded us that our well-being is not entirely of our own making, that our happiness and success cannot be entirely ascribed to personal industry.

Starting with Lincoln, tales of Thanksgiving are, of course, stories of gratitude. A Mrs. Hulda Esther Thorpe remembered "one of the best Thanksgiving dinners we ever knew." A family of prairie settlers in the 1800s was sitting down to the Thanksgiving feast. A group of outlaws "came in silently and just shoved the folks back and ate up the dinner." After they were gone, the "women made a big cornbread and with what few things that were left, they had a feast." They were all deeply thankful that they were spared.

Sometimes, though, the best stories about gratitude are built around a character who is spectacularly ungrateful. A Vermont farmer had been married for thirty years and often compared his wife's cooking with his mother's, not in his wife's favor. One Thanksgiving his wife went all out to prepare the perfect feast, one that would be better than her mother-in-law's. The farmer sat down to the Thanksgiving table and ate with great relish. After he was done, his wife said, "Well, you seemed to like that meal well enough."

Her husband thought a bit, running the major items over in his mind. "'Twas good," he allowed at last. "The turkey was roasted just right and the dressing was well seasoned. The mashed potatoes were smooth and good. The other vegetables was done just the way I like them and even the pie and the pudding was good. But the gravy—that gravy . . . well, Mother's gravy always had lumps in it!"

Enjoy the day. Be grateful. Happy Thanksgiving!

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COOK'S ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE

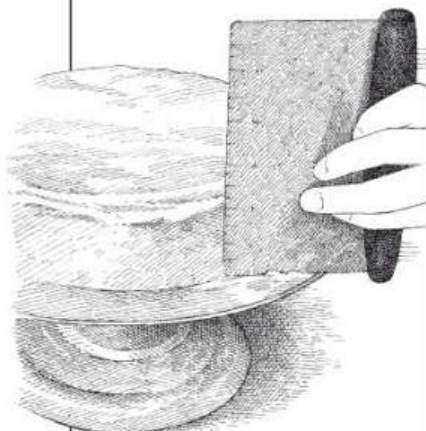
Cook's Illustrated magazine (ISSN 1068-2821), number 137, is published bimonthly by Boston Common Press Limited Partnership, 17 Station St., Brookline, MA 02445. Copyright 2015 Boston Common Press Limited Partnership. Periodicals postage paid at Boston, MA, and additional mailing offices, USPS #012487. Publications Mail Agreement No. 40020778. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to P.O. Box 875, Station A, Windsor, ON N9A 6P2. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Cook's Illustrated*, P.O. Box 6018, Harlan, IA 51593-1518. For subscription and gift subscription orders, subscription inquiries, or change of address notices, visit AmericasTestKitchen.com/support, call 800-526-8442 in the U.S. or 515-248-7684 from outside the U.S., or write to us at *Cook's Illustrated*, P.O. 6018, Harlan, IA 51593-1518.

FOR LIST RENTAL INFORMATION Contact Specialists Marketing Services, Inc., 777 Terrace Ave., 4th Floor, Hasbrouck Heights, NJ 07604; phone: 201-865-5800.

EDITORIAL OFFICE 17 Station St., Brookline, MA 02445; 617-232-1000; fax: 617-232-1572. For subscription inquiries, visit AmericasTestKitchen.com/support or call 800-526-8442.

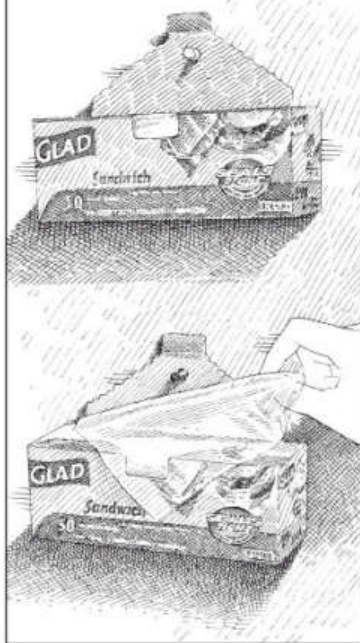
Smooth Cake Frosting

When frosting the sides of a cake, Antonia Chandler of Houston, Texas, finds that her bench scraper is the best tool for smoothing the sides. She spins the cake on a turntable-style stand, holding the edge of the scraper steady against the side of the cake so that it smooths any uneven patches.



Plastic Bag Space Saver

When he's short on storage space, Shawn Gagne of Los Angeles, Calif., uses pushpins to tack up cardboard boxes of zipper-lock bags on a wall in the pantry, where they're even more accessible.



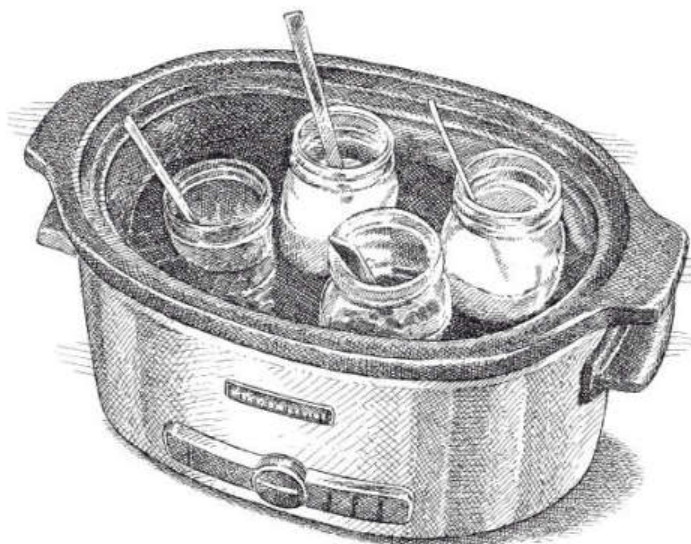
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QUICK TIPS

➤ COMPILED BY ANNIE PETITO ➤

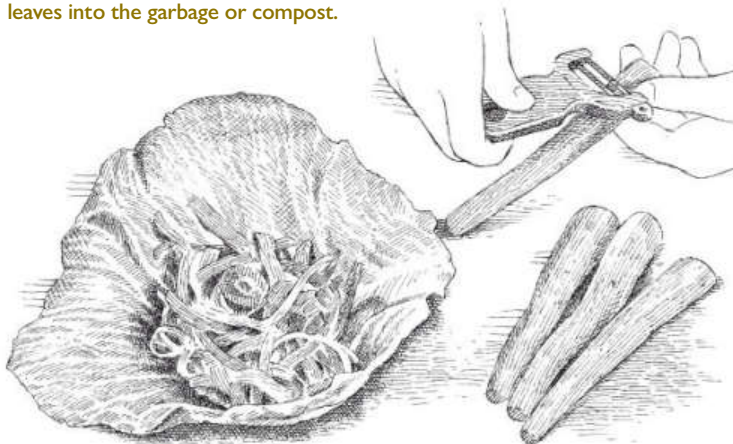
Slow-Cooker Warming Tray

Janet McCarron of Seattle, Wash., likes to set up a station for making candy or decorating cookies during the holidays and has found that her slow cooker comes in handy as a warming tray. She places glass jars of chocolate in the vessel and pours in enough water to come partially up their sides, creating a warm bath, which keeps the chocolate warm and fluid for as long as she needs while assembling her treats.



Cabbage "Bowls"

When making cabbage-based recipes, like coleslaw, Bonnie Powers of Dublin, N.H., uses the discarded outer leaves as disposable bowls for collecting vegetable peels and scraps. When she's done prepping, she simply tosses the leaves into the garbage or compost.



Keeping Tongs Closed

Helen Koenig of Bernardsville, N.J., stores tongs that don't have a lock in a 2-inch length of cardboard paper towel tube. One squeeze and the tongs slip right into their homemade "sleeve" for easy storage and removal.



Breaking Up Ground Meat

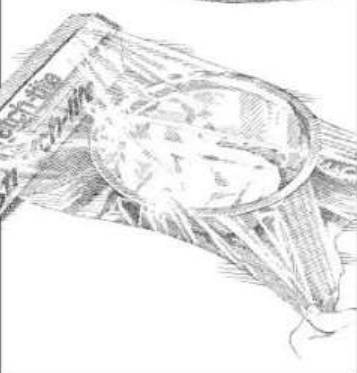
Annie Guba-Boruch of Waterbury, Conn., reaches for her pastry blender whenever she needs to cut cold butter or shortening into flour. When attempting to break up a batch of ground meat during cooking, she came up with another use for the tool. The pastry blender's sharp, parallel blades easily and neatly chop meat for more even cooking.



ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGONE

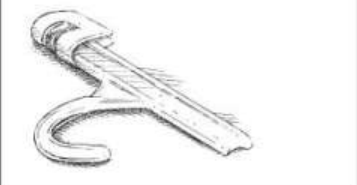
Making Plastic Wrap Stick

To help plastic wrap cling tightly to the rim of metal mixing bowls, Alex Barunas of Gifford, N.H., runs a bit of water around the sides of the bowl to give the plastic more purchase.



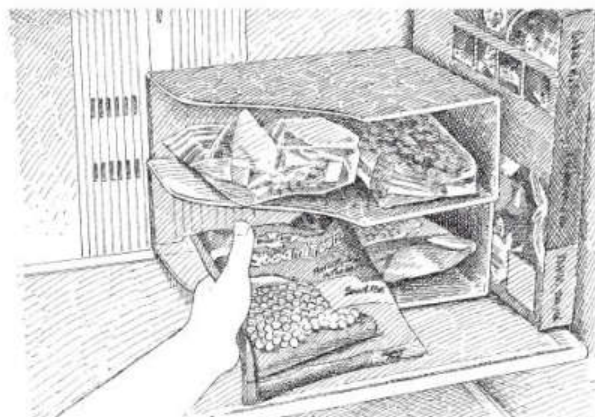
Hanger-Turned-Chip-Clip

Maryse Chevreire of San Francisco, Calif., recycles her unused skirt hangers by snapping off the pinchers to use as bag clips.



Makeshift Freezer Shelves

Rather than sift through her freezer to find hidden smaller items, Marsha Wiancki of Okemos, Mich., created shelves using plastic magazine holders. By arranging the holders on their sides with the openings facing forward, she's able to easily see and reach their contents.



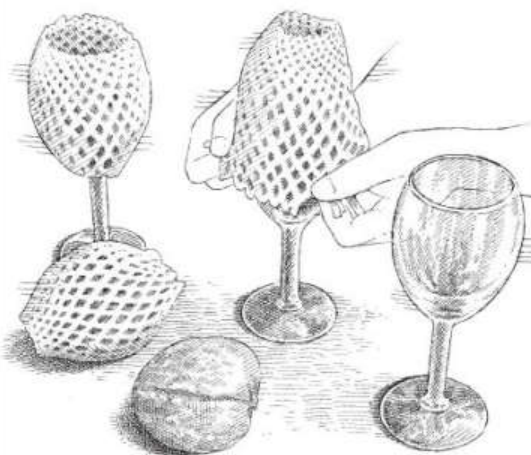
Aluminum Foil Covers

Robin Hamlin of Santa Barbara, Calif., saves the aluminum foil rounds that seal yogurt containers and reuses them to cover the cut side of fruits and veggies. The heavy-duty aluminum washes easily and stays put on the food without tearing.



Protecting Stemware

To safely transport fragile wine glasses or champagne flutes, Mary Wilbor of Glastonbury, Conn., covers the stemware bowls with the stretchable plastic netting she saves from pieces of delicate fruit (such as tomatoes and Asian pears).



Tea Bag in a Pinch

When her tea ball broke, Connie Basset of Omaha, Neb., devised this clever idea for steeping the loose leaves: She piles them in the center of a disposable paper coffee filter, bundles it up, and fastens the top with a clothespin. Once she's steeped her tea, she simply throws the "tea bag" away.



Saving Spent Lemons for Zest

Instead of tossing out her spent lemon halves after juicing, Susan Lacy of Miamisburg, Ohio, freezes them for zesting later. The halves can be easily stacked and stored in a zipper-lock bag, and the freezer firms them up for easy zesting.



Roasted Rack of Lamb

If you have the know-how, rack of lamb can be one of the simplest—and most elegant—holiday dishes you'll ever make.

➤ BY LAN LAM ◀

For many, hosting company at the holidays means pulling out all the stops to present a centerpiece-worthy entrée. Old standbys like turkey or prime rib are great choices—except that they are only for crowds. Plus, they eat up precious time and energy: From salting and trussing to roasting, resting, and carving, it can take hours or even days to get them from supermarket to table.

Enter rack of lamb. With elegantly curved rib bones attached to a long, lean loin, it is as grand as any beef roast or whole bird—but it cooks a whole lot faster and its small size makes it ideal for fewer guests. What's more, its tenderness and delicate but distinctive flavor make it approachable for those who have not tried lamb (and may surprise those who think they dislike it): Because the loin muscle of the animal gets little exercise, the meat doesn't get tough or develop much of a strong, gamy flavor. The fact that this particular cut is so lean also plays a role in its mild taste. (For more, see "The Funk Is in the Fat.")

Rack 'em Up

A single rack of domestic lamb weighs about 2 pounds and contains seven or eight rib bones that arc from the loin. Traditionally, the racks are spiffed up via "frenching," a process that involves cutting away the sinew, fat, and small bits of meat that cover the bones. It can be tedious work, but happily, butchers often take care of this so it's easy to find a roast that is just about oven-ready. Given the small size of a single rack, I decided to cook two frenched racks, which would ably serve four to six guests.

Since lamb fat is the primary source of the musky flavor that some shy away from, I trimmed the fat cap



Rack of lamb is a cinch to serve since the rib bones act as built-in carving guides. Just slice between them to produce handsome chops.

to ¼ inch. Next, I scored crosshatch marks into the fat and sprinkled the racks all over with kosher salt. Cutting slits in the fat would allow the salt to quickly penetrate the meat as well as help the fat render.

With the meat ready to go, I got down to the business of cooking. There are a lot of recipes out there promising "simple but spectacular" results, with the usual recommendation being to roast the meat in a hot oven for about 30 minutes. Using this approach, the racks didn't brown very well; plus, they were pink only at the very center—the outer portion was a dry, dusty gray. If I was going to splurge on rack of lamb, I wanted dazzling results. That meant rosy, juicy, and tender meat surrounded by a rich mahogany exterior.

And yet, abandoning the so-called simple approach resulted in only minor advancements. Slow-roasting the racks in a more moderate oven meant that every bite was juicy, but this lamb wasn't full-flavored because there was zero browning on its exterior. In the test kitchen, we often turn to dual-temperature techniques to achieve both great

browning and even cooking. The question was, how should I apply this approach to rack of lamb?

A sear-then-roast routine made sense. I fired up the stove and seared the racks in a skillet until they were good and brown, which took about 5 minutes per rack (and made a pretty good mess of my stovetop). I then placed the seared lamb on a wire rack set in a rimmed baking sheet and slipped it into a 250-degree oven to finish cooking.

The racks emerged gorgeously brown from the pan searing, but when I carved them into chops, frustration set in: Because the loin is relatively small, all that time in the skillet had overcooked most of the meat. I cleaned up and started over, this time placing a roasting pan in the oven and heating the oven to 500 degrees. My hope was that the racks would rapidly brown when they hit the preheated pan. Then I could dial down the oven and let the meat gently finish cooking. But this was another disappointment: The preheated pan wasn't hot enough to sufficiently brown the racks, and the initial high oven temperature overcooked the meat.

Slow Start

Searing followed by roasting was a no-go. How about the reverse? I placed the seasoned racks in a 250-degree oven and let them roast gently until they reached 120 degrees, or just shy of medium-rare. There were a couple of possible approaches for browning the exterior in the oven: Crank the heat as high as it would go or enlist the broiler. I tried both. The broiler browned the fat cap more quickly than the hot oven, so the rack overcooked less. But it still overcooked. Perhaps a skillet was the way to go after all.

I slow-roasted two more racks, this time pulling them from the oven when they were somewhat underdone. I then seared the fat caps one at a time in a hot skillet. To my surprise, each rack browned in less than 2 minutes. When I cut into the meat, I was again surprised, this time by how uniformly rare it was. The explanation was simple. I had assumed that the racks would require a substantial amount of time to brown and would therefore finish cooking in the skillet. But the browning happened so fast—there wasn't even time for the stovetop to get messy—that

Shopping for Lamb: For more information on what to look for and why, go to CooksofIllustrated.com/lamb.



See Lamb's Virtues

Video available free for 4 months at CooksofIllustrated.com/dec15

I clearly needed to let them roast all the way to their serving temperature, 125 degrees for medium-rare. Sure enough, using this method, I finally got the oohs and ahhs I sought: These racks had deeply browned exteriors and perfectly rosy interiors.

But why had they browned so quickly? The slow roasting time had warmed up the fat cap. This allowed it to immediately jump to the temperature necessary for stovetop browning to occur.

Spiced Salt

With a foolproof cooking method at hand, it was time to try salting the racks ahead of time to see if the treatment, which changes the meat's structure to help it hold on to more juices, was necessary. I salted two racks and let them sit for 1 hour. Then I asked tasters to compare their flavor and texture to racks that were seasoned and then immediately cooked. Tasters reported that the seasoned racks were just as juicy as the salted ones. That's because salt's ability to help meat retain juices is most apparent when meat is exposed to high temperatures, and my lamb was being cooked at only 250 degrees. That meant that it never got hot enough for much moisture to be squeezed out. It had one other thing going for it: Unlike steaks or many other roasts, rack of lamb is protected by a moisture-retaining fat cap on one side and bones on the other side. Given these factors, it was unnecessary to give the lamb a salt treatment.

What it did need was a little dressing up, so I went ahead and mixed some ground cumin with kosher salt. I used some of this cumin salt to season the racks; the rest I saved for garnishing the lamb. And while the roasts cooked, I mixed together a quick relish of roasted red peppers, fresh parsley, minced garlic, lemon juice, and extra-virgin olive oil. With the relish spooned alongside the cumin-scented chops, I knew I had a hit. I was so taken with the depth and texture that the cumin salt added that I whipped up an anise salt and paired it with a mint-almond relish. With these ultrasimple recipes at hand, lamb will surely be at the center of my holiday table more often.

Easy as 1-2-3

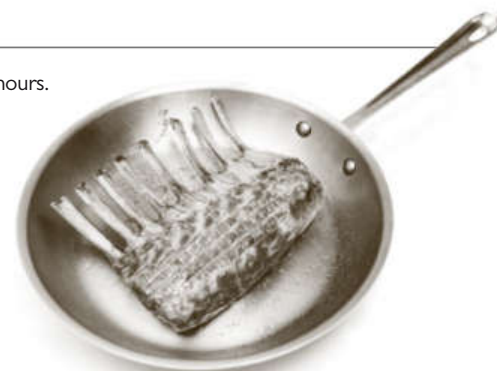
Putting an impressive roast on the table doesn't have to be stressful or take all day. Our rack of lamb is ready in less than 2 hours.



1. SEASON There's no need to salt ahead of time. Because of the insulating bones and thin layer of fat, rack of lamb sprinkled with salt right before roasting is just as juicy as meat salted an hour in advance.



2. SLOW-ROAST For juicy meat that's a rosy medium-rare from center to edge, we simply roast the racks in a 250-degree oven until they reach 125 degrees, 1 hour 5 minutes to 1 hour 25 minutes.



3. SEAR The fat cap warms up in the oven, so when it hits a hot skillet, it quickly reaches the temperature necessary for browning. Because the rack browns in just 2 minutes, none of the meat overcooks during this step.

ROASTED RACK OF LAMB WITH ROASTED RED PEPPER RELISH

SERVES 4 TO 6

We prefer the milder taste and bigger size of domestic lamb, but you may substitute lamb imported from New Zealand or Australia. Since imported racks are generally smaller, in step 1 season each rack with ½ teaspoon of the salt mixture and reduce the cooking time to 50 to 70 minutes.

Lamb

- 2 (1 ¾- to 2-pound) racks of lamb, fat trimmed to ½ to ¼ inch and rib bones frenched
- Kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil

Relish

- ½ cup jarred roasted red peppers, rinsed, patted dry, and chopped fine
- ½ cup minced fresh parsley
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ teaspoon lemon juice
- ⅛ teaspoon garlic, minced to paste
- Kosher salt and pepper

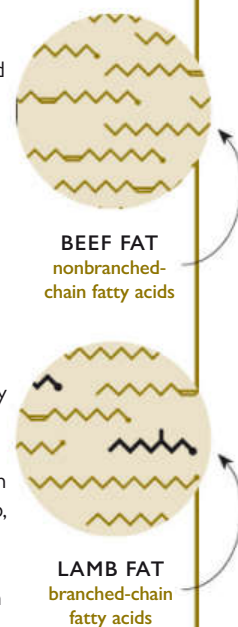
1. FOR THE LAMB: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 250 degrees. Using sharp knife, cut slits in fat cap, spaced ½ inch apart, in crosshatch pattern (cut down to, but not into, meat). Combine 2 tablespoons salt and cumin in bowl. Rub ¾ teaspoon salt mixture over entire surface of each rack and into slits. Reserve remaining salt mixture. Place racks, bone side down, on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Roast until meat registers 125 degrees for medium-rare or 130 degrees for medium, 1 hour 5 minutes to 1 hour 25 minutes.

2. FOR THE RELISH: While lamb roasts, combine red peppers, parsley, olive oil, lemon juice, and garlic in bowl. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Let stand at room temperature for at least 1 hour before serving.

3. Heat vegetable oil in 12-inch skillet over high heat until just smoking. Place 1 rack, bone side up, in

The Funk Is in the Fat

Unique branched-chain fatty acids are responsible for many of lamb's musky flavors. To find out just how important these fatty acids are, we combined ground lean lamb meat and fat to create two blends: 90 percent lean meat/10 percent fat and 80 percent lean meat/20 percent fat. When we made burgers from the blends as well as from 100 percent lean meat and rated the intensity of the lamb flavor, tasters unanimously found the meat/fat blends to have more characteristic lamb flavor than the 100 percent lean patties. When it comes to lamb, the old adage that fat equals flavor can't be overstated: Trimming some fat will result in a milder taste. —Dan Souza



skillet and cook until well browned, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to carving board. Pour off all but 1 teaspoon fat from skillet and repeat browning with second rack. Tent racks with aluminum foil and let rest for 20 minutes. Cut between ribs to separate chops and sprinkle cut side of chops with ½ teaspoon salt mixture. Serve, passing relish and remaining salt mixture separately.

ROASTED RACK OF LAMB WITH SWEET MINT-ALMOND RELISH

Substitute ground anise for cumin in salt mixture. Omit red pepper relish. While lamb roasts, combine ½ cup minced fresh mint; ¼ cup sliced almonds, toasted and chopped fine; ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil; 2 tablespoons red currant jelly; 4 teaspoons red wine vinegar; and 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard in bowl. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Let stand at room temperature for at least 1 hour before serving.

Great Chicken Marsala

Chicken cutlets napped with a silky mushroom-Marsala sauce are a restaurant standard. So why doesn't anyone cook them at home?

➤ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ◀

Everyone knows chicken Marsala, a menu staple at virtually every Italian American restaurant in the United States. But despite its wide-ranging appeal, the dish is rarely made at home. That's too bad, because it's relatively simple to prepare and—when done right—truly satisfying: thinly pounded chicken cutlets, dusted lightly with flour, pan-seared until golden brown but still tender and juicy, and napped with a sumptuous sauce of Marsala wine and thinly sliced mushrooms. What's not to like?

Well, as it turned out, quite a bit. When I prepared a handful of recipes, not one dish could hold a candle to the best restaurant versions. For starters, the thin cutlets tended to dry out by the time they browned. What's more, their flour coating turned gummy as soon as I spooned the sauce on top. Then there was the sauce itself, which ranged from thin and watery to syrupy and sweet. Clearly there was lots of room for improvement.

Crafting Cutlets

My first step was to streamline the preparation of the cutlets themselves. I knew of two approaches: Either use a meat pounder to flatten a whole breast, or cut the breast in half horizontally into two thinner pieces. The problem with the former method is that all that pounding virtually guarantees tearing the meat. On the other hand, it's difficult to evenly halve a breast horizontally since the meat becomes thinner as you approach the tapered end.

Eventually, I came up with a better way: First, halve the breast crosswise. Then, split the thick side horizontally, leaving three similarly sized pieces that require only a minimum of pounding to become cutlets (see “A New Way to Cut Cutlets”). To season the cutlets and help them stay moist, I tossed them with salt and set them aside for 15 minutes.

Starch Relief

Normally in this dish the cutlets are dredged in flour before they're seared. The flour serves a few purposes. First, it absorbs any surface moisture (a plus since moisture inhibits browning), and then it browns. It also gives the Marsala-mushroom sauce something to grab on to, so the cutlets become



Most homemade versions of chicken Marsala feature dry cutlets cloaked in an overly sweet sauce. A few simple tricks fix both issues.

nicely coated. The problem was that the flour didn't cook through in the short time that the cutlets were in the pan, causing that gummy mess once the sauce (for now, a placeholder recipe) was introduced.

I wondered if cornstarch would fare better, but it behaved similarly. I even tried using precooked starch in the form of ground saltines. The resulting cutlets were less sticky, but the coating had a gritty texture instead of a smooth one. I also tried cooking the cutlets bare, but that was a dead end: Without a flour coating, the sauce slid right off the chicken; plus, since the flour offers the chicken some protection from the heat, it was tricky to get the cutlets fully browned before they overcooked.

Maybe I needed to reconsider the approach of arranging the seared cutlets on a platter and spooning the sauce on top. Did the sauce and cutlets need to spend more time together?

Back at the stove, I returned the browned cutlets to the skillet after preparing the sauce and let it bubble gently for a few minutes. Problem solved: During simmering, any excess flour sloughed off

into the sauce where it gelatinized, leaving the coating thin, silky, and not the least bit gummy. And because the salting step was effective at maintaining moisture, this additional gentle cooking didn't harm the meat.

Marsala and Mushrooms

With perfectly cooked cutlets at hand, I turned my attention to the sauce. White button mushrooms, sliced thin and sautéed, are typically used. They are fine but subtle, and I wanted more complexity. Switching to earthier cremini mushrooms and adding garlic, shallot, and tomato paste was a good start. I had seen recipes that also included pancetta, and indeed, I liked the meatiness it contributed.

As for the Marsala, this Sicilian fortified wine is produced in both sweet and dry styles. Obviously, sweet Marsala tastes sweeter than dry, but I also found that the dry type offered more depth of flavor. In addition, I came to prefer the complexity of moderately priced (\$10 to \$12) Marsala, rather than the supercheap bottles.

Most recipes rely on a combination of chicken broth and Marsala; I liked a 1:1 ratio. I reduced both before adding them to the mushroom mixture, starting with the Marsala and then adding the broth. As we have found in previous recipes, reducing the wine and broth together prevented sufficient alcohol evaporation, producing a boozy taste. However, last-minute additions of ¼ cup of raw Marsala, lemon juice, and chopped oregano brightened the sauce without making it taste of alcohol. Finally, adding dried porcini mushrooms to the reduction rounded out the flavor.

Reducing the wine and broth helped intensify the sauce but did little to add body. (The flour from the cutlets contributed some viscosity but not nearly enough.) A few tablespoons of butter, whisked in at the very end, helped a bit more. Then, thinking about the way a restaurant chef might give the sauce some heft, reduced veal stock (demi-glace) crossed my mind. This spoonable, gelatinous ingredient can provide a luxurious consistency. I wasn't about to buy (or make) demi-glace for this recipe, but I knew of a good stand-in: gelatin. Four teaspoons added to the reducing wine gave the sauce velvety body.

After a sprinkle of parsley, everything was in its place in my new and improved classic.

Unassuming Superhero: Flour

Don't be tempted to skip flouring the chicken cutlets before pan-searing them. It is a quick step that's key to the success of the final dish.



ABSORBS MOISTURE

Flour soaks up any wetness on the raw chicken but remains dry enough to brown.



BROWNS EXTERIOR

When the cutlets are seared, it's the flour that browns and develops flavor, not the meat.



PROTECTS INTERIOR

Flour browns faster than meat, so the coated chicken can come off the heat before it overcooks.



THICKENS SAUCE

As the cutlets simmer in the sauce, some flour sloughs off and gives the sauce body.



GRABS SAUCE

The flour coating on the cutlets helps the sauce cling to the meat.

BETTER CHICKEN MARSALA

SERVES 4 TO 6

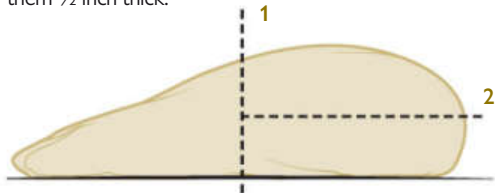
It is worth spending a little extra for a moderately priced dry Marsala (\$10 to \$12 per bottle). Serve the chicken with potatoes, white rice, or buttered pasta. For our free recipe for Better Chicken Marsala for Two, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec15.

- 2¼ cups dry Marsala
- 4 teaspoons unflavored gelatin
- 1 ounce dried porcini mushrooms, rinsed
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 2 cups chicken broth
- ¾ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup plus 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 3 ounces pancetta, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 pound cremini mushrooms, trimmed and sliced thin
- 1 shallot, minced
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 2 teaspoons lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh oregano
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 6 pieces
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh parsley

1. Bring 2 cups Marsala, gelatin, and porcini mushrooms to boil in medium saucepan over high

A New Way to Cut Cutlets

Because a chicken breast is unevenly shaped and has a thick and a thin end, it can be tricky to turn into uniform cutlets. Our novel method makes the process fool-proof: Cut each breast in half crosswise (1); then cut the thicker piece in half horizontally (2). Place the pieces between two sheets of plastic wrap and gently pound them ½ inch thick.



heat. Reduce heat to medium-high and vigorously simmer until reduced by half, 6 to 8 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, cut each chicken breast in half crosswise, then cut thick half in half again horizontally, creating 3 cutlets of about same thickness. Place cutlets between sheets of plastic wrap and pound gently to even ½-inch thickness. Place cutlets in bowl and toss with 2 teaspoons salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Set aside for 15 minutes.

3. Strain Marsala reduction through fine-mesh strainer, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible; discard solids. Return Marsala reduction to saucepan, add broth, and return to boil over high heat. Lower heat to medium-high and simmer until reduced to 1½ cups, 10 to 12 minutes. Set aside.

4. Spread flour in shallow dish. Working with 1 cutlet at a time, dredge cutlets in flour, shaking gently to remove excess. Place on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until smoking. Place 6 cutlets in skillet and lower heat to medium. Cook until golden brown on 1 side, 2 to 3 minutes. Flip and cook until golden brown on second side, 2 to 3 minutes. Return cutlets to wire rack. Repeat with 2 tablespoons oil and remaining 6 cutlets.

5. Return now-empty skillet to medium-low heat and add pancetta. Cook, stirring occasionally, scraping pan bottom to loosen browned bits, until pancetta is brown and crisp, about 4 minutes. Add cremini mushrooms and increase heat to medium-high. Cook, stirring occasionally and scraping pan bottom, until liquid released by mushrooms evaporates and mushrooms begin to brown, about 8 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer cremini mushrooms and pancetta to bowl. Add remaining 1 teaspoon oil and shallot to pan and cook until softened, 1 minute. Add tomato paste and garlic and cook until fragrant, 30 seconds. Add reduced Marsala mixture, remaining ¼ cup Marsala, lemon juice, and oregano and bring to simmer.

6. Add cutlets to sauce and simmer for 3 minutes, flipping halfway through simmering. Transfer cutlets to platter. Off heat, whisk in butter. Stir in parsley and cremini mushroom mixture. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Spoon sauce over chicken and serve.

TESTING Spatula-Spoons

We use a wooden spoon to scoop food and scrape up flavorful browned bits when making stews and pan sauces, and we use a flexible spatula to fold ingredients and swipe bowls clean. A spatula-spoon (or "spoonula") promises to serve both functions in one handy item. We purchased eight models (\$7.51 to \$14.95) and stirred jam, scraped up fond in chili, tossed a stir-fry, and folded scrambled eggs. For scraping up fond, firm and blunt top edges were most effective. We also preferred thin, straight sides that could glide along skillets. The best tools could also transfer generous amounts of food into storage containers. Ultimately, the Starpack Premium Silicone Spoonula (\$8.49) and the Rubbermaid High-Heat Spoon Scraper (\$9.13) combined all our desired qualities. We still consider our favorite wooden spoon and silicone spatula to be essential, but we'll reach for either of these spoonulas when making a recipe that requires both a wooden spoon and a spatula. For complete testing results, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec15. —Kate Shannon

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED STARPACK Premium Silicone Spoonula

MODEL: N/A

PRICE: \$8.49

COMMENTS:

This tool felt especially comfortable, and its spacious and sturdy head presses flush to cookware.

RUBBERMAID High-Heat Spoon Scraper

MODEL: FG196600

PRICE: \$9.13

COMMENTS:

Our co-winner boasts the largest head capacity in the lineup, and its edges felt extra-precise.



▶ **Andrew Makes It for You**
Video available free for 4 months
at CooksIllustrated.com/dec15



Best Ground Beef Chili

Ground beef chili offers more convenience than chili made with chunks of meat. But before you can make a truly great version, you need to understand the nature of ground beef.

➤ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ◀

I'm not from Texas, so I've never had any trouble thinking that chili by definition could only mean a bowl made with hand-cut chunks of beef. If anything, I'm always more drawn to ground beef versions, since they skip the tedious step of breaking down a whole roast. That said, I've rarely encountered a ground beef chili that can hold its own against the chunky kind. It often suffers from dry, grainy, somewhat tough meat. I set myself the challenge of changing that.

I wanted a big batch of thick, spicy, ultrabeefy chili—the kind I'd pile into a bowl with tortilla chips or rice and enjoy with a beer. In order to create that, I would first have to sort out how to give the ground meat the same juicy, tender texture found in chili made with chunks of beef.

Ground Plan

As a first step toward improving dry meat, I opted to use 2 pounds of 85 percent lean (15 percent fat) ground beef. The fat in the mix would lubricate the meat fibers, creating a sense of moistness. As for how to cook it, most chili recipes—whether using ground beef or chunks—call for browning the meat in oil to build a flavor base. Since ground beef sheds a fair amount of liquid as it cooks, and liquid precludes browning, I cooked it in three batches so that any moisture could evaporate quickly.

The next big question was how long to simmer the meat in the liquid ingredients for the most tender results. Recipes vary widely: Some suggest an hour, others call for 2 hours, and more than a few say “the longer the better.” But would the fact that the meat was ground make its proteins and collagen break down more quickly than stew meat, which requires roughly 2½ hours of simmering? All this confusion could, I figured, be cleared up by one simple test.

But first I needed a basic chili recipe to work from. After setting the browned meat aside, I sautéed a few spoonfuls of store-bought chili powder (a stand-in



Tortilla chips (or rice) are a must with this thick, rich chili that's deeply spiced with an easy-to-make ancho chile powder.

for the homemade blend I planned to mix up later), diced onions, and minced garlic in the residual fat. Once the aromatics were softened, I returned the beef to the pot along with a can of pinto beans and a small can of whole tomatoes that I pureed in the food processor. (I used judicious amounts of each since I wanted the beef to be the star of the show.) Finally, I stirred in 2 cups of water. I brought the mixture to a boil, put the lid on the pot, and transferred it to a 275-degree oven where the ambient heat would cook it gently. After about an hour, the result was only mediocre: The flavors were no longer raw-tasting, but they were somewhat blah. Plus, the beef still had the dry, tough texture I was trying to avoid.

Trying for Tenderness

Sixty minutes of simmering clearly wasn't long enough to tenderize the meat. I put the chili back into the oven, pulling it out and sampling it every 15 minutes or so. The Goldilocks moment, when the meat was fairly tender, came at the 90-minute mark.

This suggested that just because meat is ground doesn't mean it doesn't take time to tenderize: The pieces might be smaller than meat chunks, but the muscle fibers are made of the same proteins and collagen that require similar exposure to heat to break down. Heat penetrates the fibers more quickly when they are in small pieces, which is why chunks of chuck roast might take 2 to 2½ hours to tenderize, while ground beef requires only 90 minutes.

I had made progress, but the ground beef still wasn't living up to its full potential: I wanted it to be even more tender, and it wasn't perfectly moist like beef chunks are after proper browning and simmering. That's because fine pieces of ground meat give off far more moisture during the browning step than larger meat chunks do. The muscle fibers tighten up when heated, squeezing out some of the liquid they contain. And the smaller the piece, the more liquid will be lost to the surrounding environment.

There are a few tricks to help keep ground beef tender and juicy. One of them I was already doing: using meat with a relatively high fat content. Another is to add salt and let the meat sit for about 20 minutes. In addition to seasoning the meat, salt alters the structure of the meat proteins to better allow it to retain moisture. Finally, you can raise the pH of

When It Comes to Cook Time, Chuck Is Chuck

You might think that just because ground beef is made up of tiny pieces of meat, it doesn't need much time to cook. But ground chuck is exactly that—cut-up pieces of chuck roast—and as such contains the same proteins and collagen that require adequate exposure to moist heat to properly break down. Many chili recipes cook the ground meat for 45 minutes or even less. For optimally tender results, we simmer ours for 1½ to 2 hours—almost as long as we do stew meat.



CUBED VS. GROUND
Both benefit from longer cooking.



▶ **Watch: Ground Beef Triumphs**
Video available free for 4 months
at Cook'sIllustrated.com/dec15

the meat with a little baking soda to help the proteins attract more water and hold on to it (see “Better Browning Through Chemistry”).

Indeed, incorporating baking soda— $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon plus 2 tablespoons of water to help it dissolve—not only kept the meat juicy and made it even more tender, but it also produced an unforeseen benefit: Since the beef now barely shed any moisture during cooking (not even the small amount of water that I added to dissolve the baking soda) and a higher pH significantly speeds up the Maillard reaction, the meat browned much more quickly. This meant that I could cook it in a single batch rather than in three—a major timesaver.

Fat and Flavor

With that, I shifted my focus to giving the chili memorably spicy flavor. Store-bought chili powder is convenient, but it’s not that much trouble to make a homemade blend that tastes significantly better. I

Keep That Orange Slick

Because the main flavor compounds in most spices are fat soluble, skimming the bright orange fat from the finished chili will rob it of flavor. For deep, richly spiced complexity, don’t remove the fat—stir it back in.

I started with six dried whole ancho chiles, toasted to bring out their raisin-like sweetness and fruity heat. But it was hard to grind the small quantity of chiles in a food processor, since the pieces just bounced around the workbowl. One trick we’ve used in the past is to add cornmeal to the mix to bulk it up. The cornmeal also serves to slightly thicken and add corn flavor to the chili. I

used the same approach, but substituted a few tortilla chips for the cornmeal, since I always have them on hand to serve with chili.

For another layer of heat and smokiness, I stirred in minced chipotles in adobo. And to boost the chile notes without adding more heat, I threw in some sweet paprika. Of course, chili powder isn’t made from just chiles. I also added a generous amount of ground cumin, plus garlic powder, ground coriander, dried oregano, black pepper, and dried thyme.

Finally, about that fat. After the chili came out of the oven, it was covered in a layer of bright orange grease. When I reflexively skimmed it off, my tasters complained that the chili tasted a little flat and lean. The Day-Glo color should have been a giveaway that the fat was loaded with oil-soluble compounds from my spice blend. Discarding it robbed the chili of flavor. So for my next batch, instead of removing the fat, I just stirred it back in. Now the chili boasted deeply spiced complexity.

To cut some of its richness, I added 2 teaspoons of sugar and a couple of tablespoons of cider vinegar. I served the chili with lime wedges, fresh cilantro, chopped onion, and plenty of tortilla chips and/or steamed white rice. This chili was full-flavored and rich but certainly not so rich that my guests didn’t come back for seconds.

SCIENCE Better Browning Through Chemistry

Browning ground beef is a challenge since it expels juices more rapidly than chunks of meat do, and most of that moisture needs to evaporate before browning can occur. To limit the amount of liquid, the usual solution is to brown in batches. We stick with one batch but toss the meat with baking soda before cooking, which helps lock in moisture. To quantify baking soda’s impact, we ran a simple experiment.

EXPERIMENT We cooked three batches of ground beef treated with baking soda and compared them with three otherwise identical untreated batches. We calculated the pre- and postcooking moisture level of each batch and compared degrees of browning.

RESULTS On average, the untreated meat lost about 10 percent more moisture during cooking than the treated meat. That may not sound like much, but it makes a significant difference in how well ground meat browns: The treated batches were deeply browned, whereas the untreated batches didn’t brown at all. (If we kept cooking the untreated meat, it would have eventually browned but would have been overdone.)

EXPLANATION Raising the pH of meat increases its water-holding capacity, meaning that the proteins attract more water and are better able to hold on to it—not just during browning but throughout cooking. Besides keeping the meat from losing water that would make it steam versus brown, a higher pH also speeds up the Maillard reaction, making the treated meat brown even better and more quickly.



UNTREATED
Meat is flooded with liquid and fails to brown.



TREATED WITH BAKING SODA
Meat barely sheds moisture and browns nicely.

BEST GROUND BEEF CHILI

SERVES 8 TO 10

Diced avocado, sour cream, and shredded Monterey Jack or cheddar cheese are also good options for garnishing. This chili is intensely flavored and should be served with tortilla chips and/or plenty of steamed white rice.

- 2 pounds 85 percent lean ground beef
- 2 tablespoons plus 2 cups water
- Salt and pepper
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon baking soda
- 6 dried ancho chiles, stemmed, seeded, and torn into 1-inch pieces
- 1 ounce tortilla chips, crushed ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup)
- 2 tablespoons ground cumin
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 1 tablespoon ground coriander
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1–2 teaspoons minced canned chipotle chile in adobo sauce
- 1 (15-ounce) can pinto beans
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar
- Lime wedges
- Coarsely chopped cilantro
- Chopped red onion

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 275 degrees. Toss beef with 2 tablespoons water, $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons salt, and baking soda in bowl until thoroughly combined. Set aside for 20 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, place anchos in Dutch oven set over medium-high heat; toast, stirring frequently, until fragrant, 4 to 6 minutes, reducing heat if anchos begin to smoke. Transfer to food processor and let cool.

3. Add tortilla chips, cumin, paprika, garlic powder, coriander, oregano, thyme, and 2 teaspoons pepper to food processor with anchos and process until finely ground, about 2 minutes. Transfer mixture to bowl. Process tomatoes and their juice in now-empty workbowl until smooth, about 30 seconds.

4. Heat oil in now-empty pot over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, 4 to 6 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add beef and cook, stirring with wooden spoon to break meat up into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch pieces, until beef is browned and fond begins to form on pot bottom, 12 to 14 minutes. Add ancho mixture and chipotle; cook, stirring frequently, until fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes.

5. Add remaining 2 cups water, beans and their liquid, sugar, and tomato puree. Bring to boil, scraping bottom of pot to loosen any browned bits. Cover, transfer to oven, and cook until meat is tender and chili is slightly thickened, $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 hours, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking.

6. Remove chili from oven and let stand, uncovered, for 10 minutes. Stir in any fat that has risen to top of chili, then add vinegar and season with salt to taste. Serve, passing lime wedges, cilantro, and chopped onion separately. (Chili can be made up to 3 days in advance.)

Rustic Bread Stuffing

We've updated our turkey methods but never reworked stuffing. The time had come.

➤ BY ANDREA GEARY ◀

Back when cooking methods were primitive and every turkey was free-range, smart cooks filled the cavity of the bird with scraps of bread to capture the flavorful juices that would otherwise be lost during roasting. With a moist, dense texture, this stuffing no doubt provided a welcome counterpoint to meat that was probably a bit dry and tough.

Today's cooks have all the tools to produce a juicy turkey, yet we still tend to serve a soft, steamy stuffing—even when it's baked in a dish alongside the bird instead of inside its cavity. I thought that a moist and tender turkey might be better served by a stuffing that boasted a looser, lighter texture similar to that of a bread salad. With chew and crunch, my new stuffing would restore balance to the Thanksgiving spread.

A typical stuffing recipe goes like this: Combine cubes of toasted white sandwich bread with buttery sautéed aromatics, a handful of fresh chopped herbs, and maybe some browned sausage, nuts, or dried fruit. Douse the lot with broth and mix in some beaten eggs to promote that cohesive, pudding-like texture. Finally, transfer the mixture to a baking dish, and bake it in a moderate oven.

Since I wanted a bread salad-esque result, I decided to cut up a loaf of rustic bread instead of the usual sandwich bread. It also made sense to try eliminating the eggs and decreasing the broth. Otherwise, my first attempt was fairly canonical: onions, celery, butter, sage, and chicken broth. But using less liquid (I cut it by half) didn't mean that the stuffing was half as moist; it meant that half of the cubes were soggy and the rest were rock hard.

Perhaps the rustic bread was too coarse? I decided to try a baguette, but not an expensive one: The chewy, light-yet-uniform crumb of a supermarket baguette seemed like it would work well. I would need two to fill a 13 by 9-inch baking dish.

To maintain the rustic effect, I tore the loaves into bite-size pieces. After arranging the pieces on a baking sheet and drizzling them with olive oil, I toasted them briefly in a 450-degree oven until the jagged edges were browned and crisped but the interiors were still soft. Then I drizzled 2 cups of broth onto the chunks while they were still on the baking sheet, which ensured that each piece was moistened—but not drowned. Next came the sautéed celery, onions,

and sage; I transferred the mixture to a baking dish and returned it to the oven for about 30 minutes.

I was almost there. This batch had a pleasantly varied texture—soft in some spots, crisp in others, and even a bit chewy. The very bottom and end pieces of baguette became tough, though, so for the next batch I trimmed them off before ripping up the loaf. I also added a handful of dried cranberries before baking to play up the Thanksgiving angle and stirred in some chopped parsley. A sprinkle of toasted walnuts contributed a bit more savory richness.

This new approach to stuffing was so successful that it seemed a shame to confine it to Thanksgiving, so I created a year-round variation with Italian flavors and another with Middle Eastern ones.

RUSTIC BREAD STUFFING WITH CRANBERRIES AND WALNUTS

SERVES 6 TO 8

Baguettes from the bakery section of the supermarket, which have a slightly soft crust, work well in this recipe. The weight should be listed on the wrapper. To make the stuffing ahead, wrap it with plastic wrap immediately after transferring it to the baking dish, and refrigerate it for up to 24 hours. Add 5 minutes to the baking time. For our free recipe for Rustic Bread Stuffing with Dates and Almonds, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec15.

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 baguettes (10 ounces each), bottom crust and ends trimmed and discarded
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 3 celery ribs, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 2 large onions, cut into ½-inch pieces
- ½ cup dried cranberries
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh sage
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- ¼ cup walnuts, toasted and chopped coarse

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Grease 13 by 9-inch baking dish with 1 tablespoon butter and set aside. Tear baguettes into bite-size pieces (you should have about 12 cups) and spread into even layer on rimmed baking sheet. Drizzle with oil and toss with spatula until oil is well distributed. Toast in oven for 5 minutes. Stir bread, then continue to toast until edges are lightly browned and crisped, about



No eggs, less broth, and baguettes torn into bite-size pieces give the stuffing a rustic, coarse texture.

5 minutes longer. Transfer sheet to wire rack. Drizzle broth over bread and stir to combine.

2. Melt remaining 2 tablespoons butter in 10-inch skillet over medium heat. Add celery, salt, and pepper. Cook, stirring frequently, until celery begins to soften, 3 to 5 minutes. Add onions and cook until vegetables are soft but not browned, about 8 minutes. Add cranberries and sage and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute.

3. Add vegetable mixture to bread and toss with spatula until well combined. Transfer stuffing mixture to prepared dish and spread into even layer. Bake for 20 minutes. Stir with spatula, turning crisp edges into middle, and spread into even layer. Continue to bake until top is crisp and brown, about 10 minutes longer. Stir in parsley, sprinkle with walnuts, and serve.

RUSTIC BREAD STUFFING WITH FENNEL AND PINE NUTS

Substitute extra-virgin olive oil for butter (6 tablespoons in total). Substitute 1 fennel bulb, stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and cut into ½-inch pieces, for celery and increase pepper to ½ teaspoon. Omit cranberries. Substitute 1½ tablespoons chopped fresh rosemary, 1 minced garlic clove, and ½ teaspoon ground fennel for sage. Substitute toasted pine nuts for walnuts.



Look: New-Style Stuffing

Video available free for 4 months at CooksIllustrated.com/dec15

Warm Brussels Sprout Salads

Salads made with these hearty leaves can be a lot to chew on. We fixed that.

➤ BY LAN LAM ➤

Though most often sautéed or roasted, raw Brussels sprouts make a great salad green. My method has always been to slice the raw sprouts thin, dress them, and let them sit—steps that help tenderize the tough leaves and brighten their pungent flavor. Sprouts also take well to punchy dressings and bold additions like rich nuts and cheeses, tangy dried fruit, and even smoky, salty bacon.

A drawback to these slaw-like salads is that thin-slicing the sprouts is tedious—and they can literally be a lot to chew on. I had one idea that sounded faster: pulling the leaves from the stem whole instead of slicing them. But it only took a few minutes of plucking for me to realize that pulling apart the tightly packed leaves was actually more time-consuming than slicing. Scratch that.

In the end, I was able to streamline the shredding process with an assembly line approach: Rather than trimming, halving, and slicing the sprouts one by one, I worked through all the trimming before moving onto the halving, and so forth.

Even shredded, the sprouts were very dense to eat; I decided to incorporate a second leafy vegetable. A handful of bitter but more tender radicchio, shredded into fine strips, was just the thing to break up the salad's slaw-like density and add complexity.

Softening raw Brussels sprouts with a regular dressing takes about 30 minutes, but what if I dressed them with a warm vinaigrette? Surely the heat would wilt them faster, and a warm dressing would be a nice change.

Like regular vinaigrettes, warm ones are mixtures of fat and acid (usually in a 3:1 ratio). The difference is that the fat in warm vinaigrettes is heated, which meant that I had options other than oil. This seemed like a perfect opportunity to use my favorite Brussels sprouts pairing: bacon.

While I crisped a few chopped slices in a skillet, I used the microwave to lightly pickle some thinly sliced shallots in a mixture of red wine vinegar, whole-grain mustard, sugar, and salt. Then I whisked the shallot mixture into the bacon. Instead of dressing the greens in a bowl, I added them to the skillet, where they were warmed not just by the dressing but also by the pan's residual heat.

Now for those aforementioned bold additions—toasted almonds and shaved Parmesan for the bacon version and dried cranberries, toasted hazelnuts, and Manchego for another variation with brown butter. These salads were as complex as they were elegant and will play a starring role on my holiday table.



Shreds of tender radicchio lighten the salad's texture.

BRUSSELS SPROUT SALAD WITH WARM BACON VINAIGRETTE

SERVES 6

A food processor's slicing blade can be used to slice the Brussels sprouts, but the salad will be less tender. For tips on slicing them with a knife, see page 31. For our free recipe for Brussels Sprout Salad with Warm Mustard Vinaigrette, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec15.

- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon whole-grain mustard
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- Salt and pepper
- 1 shallot, halved through root end and sliced thin crosswise
- 4 slices bacon, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1½ pounds Brussels sprouts, trimmed, halved, and sliced thin
- 1½ cups finely shredded radicchio, long strands cut into bite-size lengths
- 2 ounces Parmesan, shaved into thin strips using vegetable peeler
- ¼ cup sliced almonds, toasted

1. Whisk vinegar, mustard, sugar, and ¼ teaspoon salt together in bowl. Add shallot, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and microwave until steaming, 30 to 60 seconds. Stir briefly to submerge shallot. Cover

and let cool to room temperature, about 15 minutes.

2. Cook bacon in 12-inch skillet over medium heat, stirring frequently, until crisp and well rendered, 6 to 8 minutes. Off heat, whisk in shallot mixture. Add Brussels sprouts and radicchio and toss with tongs until dressing is evenly distributed and sprouts darken slightly, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to serving bowl. Add Parmesan and almonds and toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve immediately.

BRUSSELS SPROUT SALAD WITH WARM BROWN BUTTER VINAIGRETTE

SERVES 6

A food processor's slicing blade can be used to slice the Brussels sprouts, but the salad will be less tender.

- ¼ cup lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon whole-grain mustard
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- Salt and pepper
- 1 shallot, halved through root end and sliced thin crosswise
- ¼ cup dried cranberries
- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ⅓ cup hazelnuts, toasted, skinned, and chopped
- 1½ pounds Brussels sprouts, trimmed, halved, and sliced thin
- 1½ cups baby arugula, chopped
- 4 ounces Manchego cheese, shaved into thin strips using vegetable peeler

1. Whisk lemon juice, mustard, sugar, and ¼ teaspoon salt together in bowl. Add shallot and cranberries, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and microwave until steaming, 30 to 60 seconds. Stir briefly to submerge shallot and cranberries. Let cool to room temperature, about 15 minutes.

2. Melt butter in 12-inch skillet over medium heat. Add hazelnuts and cook, stirring frequently, until butter is dark golden brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Off heat, whisk in shallot mixture. Add Brussels sprouts and arugula and toss with tongs until dressing is evenly distributed and sprouts darken slightly, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to serving bowl. Add Manchego and toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve immediately.

Look: It's Easy

Video available free for 4 months at CooksIllustrated.com/dec15



Sweet Potato Soup

The secrets to creamy sweet potato soup with deep, earthy-sweet flavor?
Use those peels, and turn off the heat.

➤ BY LAN LAM ◀

In Asia and Africa, sweet potatoes are regarded as one of those foods that need no adornment. In fact, street vendors sell whole sweet potatoes—steamed, baked, grilled, or roasted—to passersby who enjoy their earthy, sweet complexity out of hand, skin and all. Americans also eat sweet potatoes cooked every which way, but we tend to pile them high with a slew of extras—like marshmallows, orange juice, brown sugar, curry powder, cinnamon, or nutmeg—that overpower their taste.

Some cooks riff on butternut squash soup and turn sweet potatoes into a creamy puree. But, like other types of sweet potato dishes, the soups I tried were so loaded with extras that it was hard to identify the main ingredient. I wanted to strip away the non-essentials to make a silky, luxurious soup in which the sweet potatoes really stood out. I planned on garnishing the soup with a flavorful topping, just as one might dress up a baked potato. With complementary ingredients on the soup instead of inside it, the sweet potato flavor would be front and center.

Soup Starter

Following the classic protocol for a pureed vegetable soup, I began by cooking *mirepoix* (diced onion, carrot, and celery) in melted butter. To the softened aromatics, I added 2 pounds of peeled and sliced sweet potatoes along with $4\frac{1}{4}$ cups of vegetable broth. I let the mixture simmer until the potatoes were tender and then pureed the mixture in batches in the blender, adding another couple of cups of broth to the puree to create a lightly thickened consistency. The result was nice and smooth, but the savory-sweet flavor I was looking for was missing. Comments from colleagues like “generically vegetal” and “watery and lacking in richness” echoed my opinion. Evidently, the classic approach wasn’t going to work.

I started over, this time with a focus on eliminating



A drizzle of maple sour cream and a sprinkle of fresh chives highlight the pure, simple flavor of the soup.

ingredients to allow the sweet potatoes to come to the fore. After a few tries, I landed on sautéing just one sliced shallot and a few sprigs of fresh thyme in butter and then adding the potatoes along with water and salt. I let the pot simmer until the spuds were tender and then thinned the mixture with more water (for a total of about 6 cups) during blending. It was an austere list, but the fewer ingredients I used, the better (and the more like sweet potatoes) the soup tasted.

I seemed to be on the right track, but the deep earthiness I wanted wasn’t there. As I peeled my way through another couple of pounds of sweet potatoes, it struck me that perhaps the skins themselves were the missing link. I made a few more batches, cooking different amounts of potato skins in each and blending them into the soup. Using too many skins gave the soup a dark, murky appearance and a muddy flavor to match. But adding just a quarter of the peels to the pot yielded a lightly speckled soup with a mildly earthy taste. (For more information, see “Putting Peels to Work.”)

Culinary Chemistry

Could I make the soup better still? Before I thinned the puree with water to create a more soup-like consistency, it had a marvelously deep potatoey flavor. I wondered if there was a way I could avoid adding any liquid beyond the $4\frac{1}{4}$ cups of water I was using for cooking the potatoes and still get a silky, sippable consistency. It wasn’t a far-fetched idea.

I had been looking over a recipe in our archives, Roasted Sweet Potatoes (November/December 2008). Here we do a neat trick: We start the spuds in a cold oven. As the oven comes to temperature, the potatoes slowly heat up. During that time, some of the potato starches are converted into sugars by a family of amylase enzymes. The result is sweeter sweet potatoes with a silkier texture than those that simply go into a hot oven. I hoped I could use a similar approach to reduce the amount of starch in my soup so I wouldn’t need to thin down its consistency (and its flavor) with extra water.

I tried to mimic the cold-oven approach by starting the potatoes in $4\frac{1}{4}$ cups of cold salted water and slowly bringing them up to a simmer. Disappointingly, the soup turned out just as starchy as ever. After a consultation with our science editor, I understood why. It turns out that the amylase action only takes place under certain conditions: First, the temperature must be between 140 and 170 degrees. Second, salt cannot be present. (Our roasted sweet potatoes call for salt, but because the salt doesn’t penetrate as quickly during roasting as in simmering, the conversion still takes place.) Third and finally, the pH of the cooking liquid must be between 4 and 7. Satisfying two of the three requirements was easy. I was already cooking the sweet potatoes in water (pH 7), and I would wait to add salt to the water until after the starch conversion period. As for the temperature, I would have to experiment with ways to get the potatoes to the right heat level and hold them there.

Eventually I settled on gently cooking the shallot and thyme in butter and then adding the water and bringing it to a simmer (about 195 degrees). Next, I removed the pot from the heat and added the potatoes and peels. I kept the pot off the heat and let the water (which registered 150 degrees,



See It Become Soup

Video available free for 4 months at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec15](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/dec15)

right in the sweet spot for the enzymatic reaction) spur the amylase into action. After 20 minutes, the temperature of the water had dropped to 135 degrees, and the slices were bright orange and pliable. I returned the pot to the heat, added salt, and brought the mixture to a boil to finish cooking the potatoes, which took about 10 minutes. As soon as I fished out the thyme and whizzed the mixture in a blender, I knew that the amylase had done its work. The soup's satiny consistency was just right—no extra water was necessary—plus, it tasted cleaner and more vibrant than ever (see “Thinning Sweet Potatoes with Less Liquid”).

For the next go-round, I seasoned the final cooking water not just with salt and pepper but also with touches of brown sugar and cider vinegar. The former underscored the sweet taste of the potatoes; the latter balanced it out. And before assembling my colleagues to sample the soup, I put together an assortment of potential toppings.

Using classic baked potato toppings as inspiration, I mixed up some sweet potato-friendly ideas, including buttery rye croutons, candied bacon bits, and maple sour cream. When served with one of these garnishes plus a sprinkle of fresh chives, pure sweet potato flavor was apparent in every spoonful.

SWEET POTATO SOUP

SERVES 4 TO 6 AS A MAIN DISH OR 8 AS A STARTER

To highlight the earthiness of the sweet potatoes, we incorporate a quarter of the skins into the soup. In addition to the chives, serve the soup with one of our suggested garnishes (recipes follow). The garnish can be prepared during step 1 while the sweet potatoes stand in the water. For our free recipe for Sautéed Mushroom Topping, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec15.

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 shallot, sliced thin
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme
- 4¼ cups water
- 2 pounds sweet potatoes, peeled, halved lengthwise, and sliced ¼ inch thick, ¼ of peels reserved
- 1 tablespoon packed brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon cider vinegar
- Salt and pepper
- Minced fresh chives

1. Melt butter in large saucepan over medium-low heat. Add shallot and thyme and cook until shallot is softened but not browned, about 5 minutes. Add water, increase heat to high, and bring to simmer. Remove pot from heat, add sweet potatoes and reserved peels, and let stand uncovered for 20 minutes.

2. Add sugar, vinegar, 1½ teaspoons salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper. Bring to simmer over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and cook until potatoes are very soft, about 10 minutes.

3. Discard thyme sprigs. Working in batches, process soup in blender until smooth, 45 to 60 seconds. Return soup to clean pot. Bring to simmer over medium heat, adjusting consistency if desired. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve, topping each portion with sprinkle of chives.

BUTTERY RYE CROUTONS

MAKES 1½ CUPS

The croutons can be made ahead and stored in an airtight container for 1 week.

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 slices light rye bread, cut into ½-inch cubes (about 1½ cups)
- Salt

Heat butter and oil in 10-inch skillet over medium heat. When foaming subsides, add bread cubes and cook, stirring frequently, until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Transfer croutons to paper towel-lined plate and season with salt to taste.

CANDIED BACON BITS

MAKES ABOUT ¼ CUP

Break up any large chunks before serving.

- 4 slices bacon, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 2 teaspoons dark brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon cider vinegar

Cook bacon in 10-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until crisp and well rendered, 6 to 8 minutes. Using slotted spoon, remove bacon from skillet and discard fat. Return bacon to skillet and add brown sugar and vinegar. Cook over low heat, stirring

DISCOVERY

Putting Peels to Work

Instead of discarding the potato peels, we blend some of them into our soup to take advantage of an earthy-tasting compound they contain. The compound, called methoxypyrazine, is potent—it's detectable in water in levels as low as one part per trillion—so we use only one-quarter of the peels in order to avoid overwhelming the soup.



constantly, until bacon is evenly coated. Transfer to plate in single layer. Let bacon cool completely.

MAPLE SOUR CREAM

MAKES ½ CUP

Maple balances the sweet potatoes' earthiness.

- ⅓ cup sour cream
- 1 tablespoon maple syrup

Combine ingredients in bowl.

SCIENCE

Thinning Sweet Potatoes with Less Liquid

➤ Soaking sweet potatoes in hot water before cooking is the trick.

Creating a soup with prominent sweet potato flavor meant using a minimal amount of water. The only catch? Sweet potatoes require more water than less starchy vegetables like squash or carrots to be thinned to a soupy consistency after boiling. That's because their large starch molecules form a loose mesh that traps added water, preventing the texture from turning runny. Eventually, if enough water is added, the mesh can't hold any more liquid, and the texture loosens and thins.

But we discovered a trick: By adding the sweet potatoes to simmering water and then letting them sit off heat for 20 minutes before boiling them, the large starch molecules are converted into much smaller sugar molecules that are unable to create a mesh. This meant that we only needed to puree the sweet potatoes with the 4¼ cups of cooking liquid to get just the right consistency, with no additional liquid needed. But that's not the only benefit: The conversion of starch to sugar also makes the potatoes taste even better.



USUAL WAY:
BOIL THEN PUREE



OUR WAY:
SOAK BEFORE BOILING

Reinventing Pecan Bars

By banishing the custard filling in favor of a topping that emphasizes the pecan's nutty richness, we made this bar cookie simpler, too.

➤ BY ANNIE PETITO ➤

Most pecan bars take their cue from pecan pie, with a single layer of nuts dominated by a thick, gooey, ultrasweet filling sitting atop a pat-in-the-pan crust. I'm not opposed to that style, but it's mainly about the filling and only a little about the nuts. As a lover of nuts (pecans especially), I've always thought it would be great to have a bar that emphasized the star ingredient.

The closest I've come are recipes that ditch the rich, egg-based custard in favor of a toffee-like topping. These call for heating sugar and butter together until thickened, stirring in the nuts, and spreading the mixture over a parbaked crust before popping it into the oven. But when I tried a few such approaches, I found that the resulting bars still had a one-note sweetness that distracted from the pecans—and there were never enough pecans in the first place. My ideal was a pecan bar featuring a buttery crust piled high with nuts held in place not by a filling, per se, but by a not-too-sweet glaze whose only jobs were to enhance the flavor of the pecans and glue them to the crust. For that kind of a bar, I was on my own.

Going Nuts

I started with a placeholder crust, a food processor-blended mixture of flour, sugar, salt, and cold butter that I borrowed from our archives and scaled up to fit a 13 by 9-inch pan (you can never have too many cookies on hand during the holidays). I patted the sandy dough into the pan and parbaked it for 20 minutes at 350 degrees until the crust was light brown—standard procedure to prevent a wet filling from seeping in and making it soggy.

Since I wanted a topping that was all about the nuts, I wondered what would happen if I simply tossed the pecans with corn syrup, which is one-third less sweet than granulated sugar, before spreading them over the crust. I tried this, stirring ½ cup into a relatively modest 2 cups of chopped pecans,



Making these pecan bars couldn't be easier. The crust requires no parbaking, and both it and the topping are simply stirred together in bowls.

which I toasted first to enhance their rich flavor (see “Pretoasting Nuts Before Baking”). But it was a bust, as the corn syrup's flat taste did nothing to bring out the flavor of the nuts, and now the bar wasn't sweet enough overall. Next, I experimented with maple syrup, thinking its caramel-like flavors might complement the pecans, heating it with some butter to cut some of the sweetness and bring extra nuttiness to the glaze. Its flavors matched nicely with the pecans, but the syrup dried out and crystallized in the oven, making the topping crusty with an unappealing matte finish. Honey didn't work either. Though it produced a moist, glossy, slightly chewy topping that my tasters liked for its texture, its prominent flavor was a distraction from the pecans. Ultimately, I landed on a combination of corn syrup and brown sugar, the latter's molasses-like notes a good match for the pecans. I heated ½ cup of corn syrup and ¾ cup of brown sugar with 7 tablespoons of butter

on the stove until the mixture was bubbly and syrupy; I then took the glaze off the heat and stirred in vanilla extract to add complexity, followed by the pecans. This glaze had a lot going for it: It was glossy and stayed slightly moist and chewy in the oven. But its sweetness still dominated the pecans. I wondered if I could fix that simply by increasing the amount of nuts, which had been my goal anyway.

I upped the nuts from 2 cups to 3 cups and left them in halves, which gave them a more impressive presence. This worked so well to offset the glaze's sweetness that I added another cup. The nuts were now the main event of the topping, enhanced but not overpowered by the glaze. There was another bonus: With this many pecans, the nuts did not sit neatly in a single layer on the crust but were more haphazardly layered on top of one another, allowing for a variety of textures—some nuts were chewy, sitting directly in a slick of glaze, while those sitting on the very top were crisp.

Crust Control

With the topping settled, I turned my attention back to the crust. I'd been using the food processor to cut the cold butter into the flour, but it occurred to me that there was an even easier crust I could use. In our French Apple Tart (November/December 2014), we make an easy press-in crust using melted butter instead of chilled, stirring it right into the dry ingredients. Buttery and sturdy, this shortbread-like crust was ideal for the pecan topping and a snap to make.

I had an additional thought: Now that the topping was barely wet at all, did I even need to parbake the crust? I tried skipping this step, spreading the hot topping over the unbaked crust and baking it for 20 minutes. When I turned the bars out of the pan, I found that the bottom of the crust was still pale and

slightly pliable. Baking the bars on the bottom rack and for a little longer produced a crust that was evenly golden, but it also created a new problem: Since the bars were closer to the heat source, more moisture was evaporating from the topping, which was getting crunchy and brittle in parts, especially at the edges.

Cool Before Cutting

To ensure that the bars slice into neat squares, make sure to let them cool completely so the topping and crust have time to firm up.



▶ Watch Annie Make the Bars
Video available free for 4 months
at CookIllustrated.com/dec15

SCIENCE Pretoasting Nuts Before Baking

➤ For deep nutty flavor, don't rely on baking to brown nuts. Toast beforehand.

We're always surprised when recipes for baked goods that call for nuts don't specify toasting them first. Like browning meat or caramelizing sugar, the simple act of toasting nuts makes them taste remarkably more complex. Toasting not only produces Maillard browning reactions that create hundreds of new flavor compounds but also brings the nuts' oils to the surface, where they oxidize and produce rich, roasted aromas. But baking nuts as part of a bar cookie or quick bread isn't enough to produce these results. Nuts need to reach at least 300 degrees and be held there for several minutes for significant browning to occur. Nuts folded into batter or cookie dough won't rise above the temperature of the crumb's interior, which is done at about 200 degrees. Nuts used as a topping can reach higher temperatures, but only after any surrounding moisture has burned off, which doesn't give them enough time to brown before the item is taken out of the oven.

To prove the point, we baked two batches of our Ultranutty Pecan Bars, one made according to the recipe with toasted nuts and the other made with untoasted nuts. Though the caramelized glaze helped to darken both nuts, the pretoasted ones were noticeably more brown and tasted more complex.

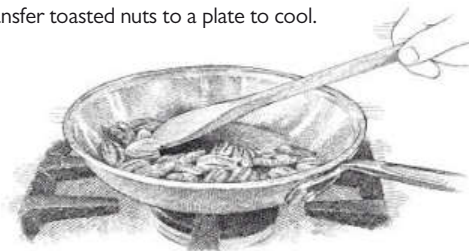
TECHNIQUE | HOW TO TOAST NUTS

Nuts (especially irregularly shaped ones) toast more evenly in the oven, but the stovetop is more convenient for amounts less than 1 cup. To avoid overbrowning, transfer toasted nuts to a plate to cool.



IN THE OVEN

Spread nuts in single layer on rimmed baking sheet and toast in preheated 350-degree oven until fragrant and slightly darkened, 8 to 12 minutes, shaking sheet halfway through to prevent burning (for smaller nuts like pine nuts, check them earlier).



ON THE STOVETOP

Place nuts in single layer in dry skillet set over medium heat and toast, stirring frequently, until fragrant and slightly darkened, 3 to 5 minutes.

Up until now I had been boiling the glaze on the stove before adding the nuts. If I didn't do that, I thought, maybe enough moisture would stay in the glaze to keep the topping more pliable. Plus, it would make the recipe even quicker. It was worth trying.

For my next test, I combined the brown sugar, corn syrup, vanilla, and salt in a bowl. I melted the butter separately and then stirred it, piping hot, into the mixture so the sugar would melt, continuing to stir until the mixture was homogeneous and glossy. But it was so thick that after I stirred in the nuts, there was no question of spreading it evenly across the crust. All I could do was push it to the edges as best I could, leaving patches of crust bare. I was sure this was a dead end, but as I watched the bars cook, I could see the thick brown sugar mixture begin to melt. After 25 minutes, the topping was bubbling across the crust, and all the empty spots were completely coated.

Once the bars were cooled, I turned them out of the pan. They were golden brown on the bottom, with a glossy, even sheen on top. I trimmed the edges to neaten them up and cut them into squares. The bars were chewy and moist, not overly sweet, and loaded with pecans. For a final touch, I sprinkled the bars with flake sea salt as they came out of the oven.

Topping Clumps? Not to Worry

To streamline our Ultranutty Pecan Bars recipe, we skipped the step of heating the topping on the stovetop. Instead, we stirred the ingredients together off heat and spread the thick mixture as best we could over the crust. Don't worry if there are bare patches: The topping melts during baking, distributing itself evenly over the crust.



ULTRANUTTY PECAN BARS

MAKES 24 BARS

It is important to use pecan halves, not pieces. The edges of the bars will be slightly firmer than the center. If desired, trim 1/4 inch from the edges before cutting into bars. Toast the pecans on a rimmed baking sheet in a 350-degree oven until fragrant, 8 to 12 minutes, shaking the sheet halfway through.

Crust

- 1 3/4 cups (8 3/4 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 6 tablespoons (2 2/3 ounces) sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

Topping

- 3/4 cup packed (5 1/4 ounces) light brown sugar
- 1/2 cup light corn syrup
- 7 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and hot
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 4 cups (1 pound) pecan halves, toasted
- 1/2 teaspoon flake sea salt (optional)

1. FOR THE CRUST: Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Make foil sling for 13 by 9-inch baking pan by folding 2 long sheets of aluminum foil; first sheet should be 13 inches wide and second sheet should be 9 inches wide. Lay sheets of foil in pan perpendicular to each other, with extra foil hanging over edges of pan. Push foil into corners and up sides of pan, smoothing foil flush to pan. Lightly spray foil with vegetable oil spray.

2. Whisk flour, sugar, and salt together in medium bowl. Add melted butter and stir with wooden spoon until dough begins to form. Using your hands, continue to combine until no dry flour remains and small portion of dough holds together when squeezed in palm of your hand. Evenly scatter tablespoon-size pieces of dough over surface of pan. Using your fingertips and palm of your hand, press and smooth dough into even thickness in bottom of pan.

3. FOR THE TOPPING: Whisk sugar, corn syrup, melted butter, vanilla, and salt together in medium bowl until smooth (mixture will look separated at first but will become homogeneous), about 20 seconds. Fold pecans into sugar mixture until nuts are evenly coated.

4. Pour topping over crust. Using spatula, spread topping over crust, pushing to edges and into corners (there will be bare patches). Bake until topping is evenly distributed and rapidly bubbling across entire surface, 23 to 25 minutes.

5. Transfer pan to wire rack and lightly sprinkle with flake sea salt, if using. Let bars cool completely in pan on rack, about 1 1/2 hours. Using foil overhang, lift bars out of pan and transfer to cutting board. Cut into 24 bars. (Bars can be stored at room temperature for up to 5 days.)

Our Guide to Turkey

Turkey can look and taste great, or it can be a dry, pale disaster. Even if this is your first turkey, our guide will help you buy, prepare, and roast the perfect bird. BY ELIZABETH BOMZE

SHOPPING

Around the holidays, turkeys come fresh and frozen, large and small, and often stamped with confusing package labels. Here's what to look for—and what to avoid.

Fresh Isn't Always Best

Unless you're buying a turkey fresh from a local farm, a frozen turkey is a better bet. Why? Frozen turkeys are frozen quickly and completely, which prevents large ice crystals from forming and damaging the meat. Turkeys labeled "fresh" may be chilled to as low as 26 degrees, a temperature at which tiny ice crystals can still form in the meat. If these crystals melt (which can happen if the temperature fluctuates during transport or thawing), they can merge with neighboring crystals, refreeze, and puncture the meat, allowing juices to escape during cooking and the meat to cook up dry and tough.

Don't Buy Big

The bigger the bird, the harder it is to get the white and dark meat to cook evenly. Plus, some ovens can't accommodate large turkeys. We recommend birds that weigh between 12 and 14 pounds. If you're feeding a crowd, consider supplementing the whole bird with turkey parts.

Buyer Beware

The terms below aren't always plainly stamped on package labels, so be sure to check the fine print for notations about water retention or added ingredients.

Water-Chilled

Most poultry is water-chilled—that is, dunked in a cold chlorinated bath, which causes it to retain water, diluting flavor and inflating cost. We've found that these birds can taste "bland" and "spongy" compared with air-chilled poultry. (Air-chilling is typically noted on labels.) The only water-chilled poultry we do buy is kosher, since the process saves you the trouble of brining.

Pre- or Self-Basted

Pre- or self-basted (also called "enhanced") turkeys are water-chilled birds injected with a solution (look for turkey broth, oil, sugar, or sodium phosphate on the label) to enhance flavor and moisture. We've found them somewhat wet with a mild, almost bland flavor.

MUST-HAVE TURKEY TOOLS

Instant-Read Thermometer:

➤ **Our favorite:** ThermoWorks Splash-Proof Super-Fast ThermoPen (\$96.00)

We love this thermometer's accuracy, how rapidly it registers temperatures, and its large, easy-to-read display.



Roasting Rack:

➤ **Our favorite:** All-Clad Non-Stick Roasting Rack (\$24.95)

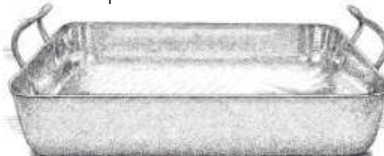
This durable rack has conveniently located handles and is large enough to hold a 14-pound turkey.



Roasting Pan:

➤ **Our favorite:** Calphalon Contemporary Stainless Roasting Pan with Rack (\$99.99)

The sturdy construction of this pan and its roomy, secure handles earned it our top rating. It comes with a decent U-shaped rack.



Don't Bother:

➤ **Covered Oval Roasting Pans**

Problems: narrow, crowded, small handles

➤ **Disposable Aluminum Roasting Pans**

Problems: flimsy construction, no handles

➤ **Bulb Baster**

Problems: basting prevents skin from drying and crisping (see "Six Roasting Rules")

Our Favorite Turkeys

We prefer air-chilled poultry, which is hung from a conveyor belt and circulated around a cold room, because the process produces birds with better flavor and texture than water-chilled birds. However, air-chilled turkeys can be hard to find, so we have two alternatives.



Timesaver: Kosher

Per Jewish dietary law, kosher turkey carcasses are covered in kosher salt and then rinsed multiple times in cold water, which seasons the meat and helps it retain moisture. As a result, kosher turkeys do not need to be brined or salted.

➤ **Our favorite:** Empire Kosher Turkey (\$2.49 per lb)



Splurge: Heritage

Because heritage turkeys are conceived naturally and allowed to live longer than conventional birds, they have longer legs and wings, more fat and dark meat, and richer flavor. The downside: They can cost 10 times more than conventional turkeys.

➤ **Our favorite:** Mary's Free-Range Heritage Turkey (\$166.72 for 7- to 14-lb bird, plus shipping)

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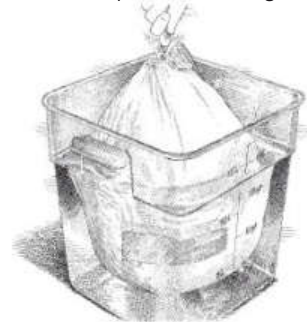
CookIllustrated.com/thanksgiving.

BEFORE YOU COOK

Defrost Early

Whole turkeys take several days to thaw. Plan on one day for every 4 pounds—and if your bird isn't kosher or prebasted, factor in at least 6 hours to brine or at least 24 hours to salt.

➤ **Emergency Quick-Thaw:** Place turkey in its wrapper in bucket filled with cold water and thaw for 30 minutes per pound. Change water every half-hour to prevent bacteria growth.



Save (Most of) the Giblets

Turkey cavities often contain the neck, heart, and gizzard—flavor powerhouses that should be used for gravy. Brown and sweat them to extract their flavor; then discard. Just don't use the liver (large, shiny, dark red); its strong flavor ruins gravy.

Brine or Salt for Better Flavor and Texture

Brining and salting both season and enhance juiciness in lean meat like turkey. Which method you use depends on how much time and space you have and how much you care about having really crisp skin.

Brining

Pros: faster (6 to 12 hours)

Cons: requires a lot of fridge space; adds extra moisture that can prevent skin from crisping

➤ **Brining Bags:** Ziploc Big Bags

XL (\$5.79 for four 2 by 1.7-foot foodsafe bags)

Salting

Pros: requires less fridge space; helps skin dry out and crisp

Cons: slower (24 to 48 hours)

SCIENCE If You Salt, Don't Rush It

To quantify just how far salt moves through turkey muscle fibers, we applied 1 teaspoon of kosher salt per pound evenly to four turkey breasts, wrapped them in plastic wrap, and refrigerated them for 1, 12, 24, and 48 hours, respectively. Then we cut slivers from each breast and tested them (alongside an untreated control breast) with a sodium ion meter.

The data confirmed that longer salting times led to more evenly seasoned meat—and that shorter salting times are actually detrimental. Whereas the exterior of turkey salted for just 1 hour was inedibly salty and its interior bland, the bird salted for 24 hours was more evenly seasoned, and better still after 48 hours.

THE BOTTOM LINE: If you're salting, it is essential to do it for at least 24 hours to ensure that the meat is evenly seasoned. Shorter salting times will merely leave the outer layers overly salty and are not worth the trouble.

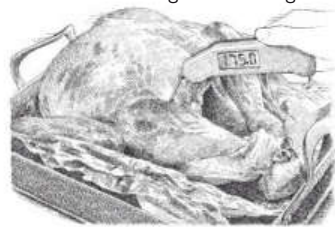
CORE TECHNIQUE | TAKING TURKEY'S TEMPERATURE

The most reliable way to gauge the doneness of turkey is to take its temperature with an instant-read thermometer.

Breast: Insert the thermometer from the neck end, holding it parallel to the bird. (Avoid hitting the bone, which can give an inaccurate reading.) It should register 160 degrees.



Thigh: Insert the thermometer at an angle into the area between the drumstick and breast away from the bone. It should register 175 degrees.



Pink Turkey Is OK

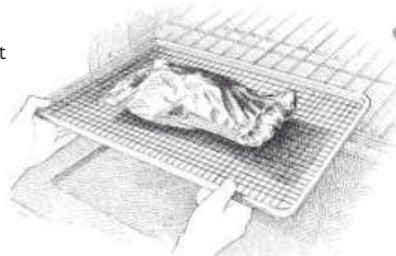
Pink-tinted turkey isn't necessarily undercooked. Often, the color is simply an indication that the pH of the meat is relatively high, which stabilizes the meat's pink pigment so that it doesn't break down when exposed to heat. (We've observed that pork with a high pH can also remain pink when fully cooked.) As long as the meat registers the prescribed temperature, it's safe to eat.

Reheating Leftover Turkey

Our gentle method helps ensure moist meat and crisp skin.

1. Wrap all leftovers in aluminum foil, stacking any slices, and place on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Heat in 275-degree oven until meat registers 130 degrees.

2. Place any skin-on pieces skin side down in lightly oiled skillet over medium-high heat, heating until skin recrrips.



1. WARM GENTLY

Heat all leftovers in 275-degree oven.



2. RECRISP SKIN

Re crisp any skin-on pieces in oiled skillet.

SIX ROASTING RULES

1. Don't stuff

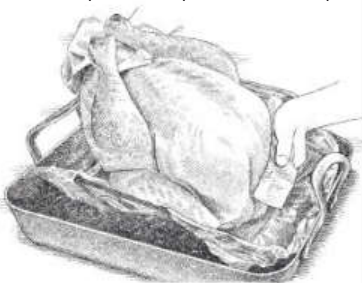
Stuffing cooked in the turkey cavity tastes great, but by the time the stuffing reaches a safe temperature (165 degrees), the meat is overcooked.

2. Roast on a rack

Roasting a turkey on a V-rack allows air to circulate around the bird, which helps the meat cook evenly and the skin dry out and crisp.

3. Flip during cooking

Start the bird breast side down to shield the white meat from the heat; then turn it breast side up halfway through cooking to crisp the skin. Use clean paper towels to grab the turkey at the top and bottom ends, tip it so the juices in the cavity run into the pan, and flip it breast side up.



4. Don't baste

Basting does nothing to moisten dry breast meat. The liquid just runs off the turkey, and it actually prevents the skin from drying and crisping.

5. Don't rely on pop-up thermometers

If your turkey comes with a pre-inserted thermometer, ignore it (but don't remove it). These devices can pop up above or below a food-safe temperature.

6. Let rest before carving

Resting the turkey for about 30 minutes allows its muscle fibers to reabsorb juices; skip this step and that liquid will run all over your carving board, leaving the meat dry. No need to tent the turkey with aluminum foil; as long as it's intact, it will cool slowly.



Miso-Marinated Salmon

Turns out, miso is one of the best ways to flavor salmon—inside and out.

➤ BY ANNIE PETITO ➤

The Japanese technique of marinating fish in miso started as a way to preserve a fresh catch without refrigeration during its long journey inland. In the last few years, however, after its introduction by chef Nobu Matsuhisa at his namesake restaurant, it has become a popular restaurant preparation in this country. The technique itself is quite simple. Miso is combined with sugar, sake, and mirin (sweet Japanese rice wine) to make a marinade that is typically applied to oily fish like salmon or black cod and left to sit for about three days; during that time, the marinade seasons the fish and draws moisture out of its flesh so that it becomes quite firm and dense. The fish is then scraped clean and broiled, producing meaty-textured, well-seasoned fillets with a lacquered savory-sweet glaze.

Those flavors pair particularly well with a rich fish like salmon, and the marinade takes minutes to make. But to me, three days is just too long to wait for such a simple dish—and frankly, I don't prefer the salmon to be quite so dense. I wondered if I could tweak the traditional technique to produce miso-marinated salmon just to my liking: moist, well-seasoned fillets that were slightly firmer than usual and evenly burnished on the surface.

I started by applying a riff on the Nobu marinade to the salmon and was happy with its flavor balance and consistency: A loose paste made from ½ cup of white miso, ⅓ cup of sugar, and 3 tablespoons each of sake and mirin, it clung nicely to the fillets. The question was how long to let the fish marinate. To find out, I made several more batches of the marinade, coated four skin-on salmon fillets with each, and let the fish sit for 30 minutes, 1 hour, 6 hours, and 24 hours—the longest I was willing to wait. After wiping off the excess paste, I placed the fillets on a foil-covered wire rack set in a baking sheet and broiled them 6 inches from the element. To confirm that there was a benefit to marinating, not just glazing, the fish, I also coated another four unmarinated fillets with the marinade mixture just before cooking.

The results were convincing: The flavor of the glazed fillets was merely skin-deep, while the batch that had been marinated for 24 hours delivered deep, complex seasoning throughout. There was a textural bonus to marinating, too: The salmon had

firmed up just a bit at the surface, which made for a nice contrast to its silky interior. There was some flexibility with the marinating time; I could achieve largely the same effect when I marinated the fish for anywhere from 6 to 24 hours.

The only remaining problem was that the glaze was overbrowning before the interior was cooked. Reducing the sugar to ¼ cup helped (and nobody missed the extra sweetness), but the real fix was lowering the oven rack. By moving the rack 8 inches from the element, the fillets cooked up tender and silky just as the glaze took on an attractively deep bronze color—and if the edges started to burn, I simply pulled up the foil underneath to act as a shield. It was just the result I wanted in a fraction of the time.

MISO-MARINATED SALMON

SERVES 4

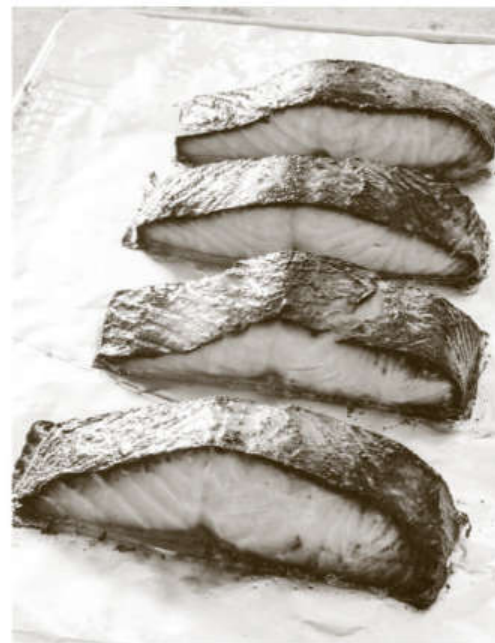
Note that the fish needs to marinate for at least 6 or up to 24 hours before cooking. Use center-cut salmon fillets of similar thickness (see page 29). See page 31 for tips on removing pinbones. Yellow, red, or brown miso paste can be used instead of white. For our free recipe for Miso-Marinated Salmon for Two, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec15.

- ½ cup white miso paste
- ¼ cup sugar
- 3 tablespoons sake
- 3 tablespoons mirin
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) skin-on salmon fillets
- Lemon wedges

1. Whisk miso, sugar, sake, and mirin together in medium bowl until sugar and miso are dissolved (mixture will be thick). Dip each fillet into miso mixture to evenly coat all flesh sides. Place fish skin side down in baking dish and pour any remaining miso mixture over fillets. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 6 hours or up to 24 hours.

2. Adjust oven rack 8 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Place wire rack in rimmed baking sheet and cover with aluminum foil. Using your fingers, scrape miso mixture from fillets (do not rinse) and place fish skin side down on foil, leaving 1 inch between fillets.

3. Broil salmon until deeply browned and centers of fillets register 125 degrees, 8 to 12 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through cooking and shielding edges of fillets with foil if necessary. Transfer to platter and serve with lemon wedges.



Broiling the fish 8 inches from the element ensures even browning.

Why Marinate with Miso?

A miso marinade works much like a typical curing technique. The miso (a paste made by fermenting soybeans and sometimes other grains with salt and a grain- or bean-based starter called *koji*), sugar, and alcohol all work to season and pull moisture out of the flesh, resulting in a firmer, denser texture. Miso also adds flavor benefits: sweetness, acidity, and water-soluble compounds such as glutamic acid that, over time, penetrate the proteins and lend them deeply complex flavor.



MANY SHADES OF MISO

We prefer the sweet, fruity flavor of white miso for this recipe, though earthier yellow, red, or brown types can also be used.



See It Happen

Video available free for 4 months at CooksIllustrated.com/dec15

Pasta e Ceci

Pasta and chickpeas is a homey Italian standard.
Our tweaks added depth but not fuss.

➤ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ◀

P*asta e ceci*—pasta and chickpeas—have been paired up in Italian cuisine for centuries. The combination is cheap, simple, and pantry-ready, and the dish itself—a sibling of *pasta e fagioli*—is hearty, flavorful, and fast to make. It's one of those one-pot meals that home cooks turn to over and over again.

Just about every Italian household has a version, which explains why published recipes range dramatically—from brothy soups to hearty stews and even lightly sauced pastas. Simple aromatics like onion, celery, carrot, and garlic are common but not compulsory, as are additions like pancetta, tomato, rosemary, and parsley. In fact, the only constants are the namesake ingredients—and even those can vary. It's common to see both dried and canned chickpeas, as well as fresh and dried pasta of various shapes. Using up broken strands of spaghetti or linguine befits the dish's frugal nature, but short pastas match particularly well with the chickpeas.

Preparing a handful of recipes helped me develop my own ideal: a loose stew that's thick with creamy beans and stubby pasta but is also savory enough to balance the starchy components. And it had to be on the table in well under an hour.

A quick version meant I'd be using canned chickpeas, but it wasn't a sacrifice. We've found that many canned chickpeas are uniform and well seasoned. I started by sautéing a soffritto—minced onion, carrot, celery, and garlic—in olive oil. I then stirred in a couple of cups of water (cleaner-tasting than either chicken or vegetable broth) and two 15-ounce cans of chickpeas along with their liquid (we've found that the starchy, seasoned liquid adds body and flavor). I also added 8 ounces of ditalini, a popular choice for their chickpea-like size. The mixture simmered for about 10 minutes, by which point the pasta was tender and had released some starch that thickened the stew.

I liked that the pasta and chickpeas were chunky and distinct (some recipes puree some or all of the chickpeas), but I did want to soften up the beans a bit more. So rather than adding them along with the pasta, I gave them a 10-minute head start. The extra simmering time changed their texture from snappy to creamy, and because they broke down



This dish takes just 30 minutes from pantry to table.

a bit, they added even more body to the cooking liquid.

With the consistency of the stew just right, I circled back to its flavor—which, despite the soffritto, was lackluster. My instinct was to add some diced pancetta, which I'd seen in a few recipes. It lent the stew meaty depth, but it also added chewy bits that marred the overall creamy texture. The solution was to grind the pork to a paste in the food processor and then incorporate it into the soffritto. While I had the appliance out, I saved myself some knife work and blitzed the vegetables, too.

Tomatoes and a minced anchovy, both packed with umami-enhancing glutamates, were good additions as well. I also opted for a small can of whole tomatoes, chopped coarsely. The final tweaks—minced rosemary and a dash of red pepper flakes added to the soffritto, plus last-minute additions of parsley and lemon juice—provided bite and brightness.

I topped my bowl with grated Parmesan and a drizzle of oil and tucked into a savory, rib-sticking stew that I'd thrown together in about 30 minutes.

PASTA E CECI (PASTA WITH CHICKPEAS)

SERVES 4 TO 6

Another short pasta, such as orzo, can be substituted for the ditalini, but make sure to substitute by weight and not by volume.

- 2 ounces pancetta, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 small carrot, peeled and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 small celery rib, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 onion, halved and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 (14-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, drained
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for serving
- 1 anchovy fillet, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh rosemary
- 2 (15-ounce) cans chickpeas (do not drain)
- 2 cups water
- Salt and pepper
- 8 ounces (1½ cups) ditalini
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup)

1. Process pancetta in food processor until ground to paste, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add carrot, celery, and garlic and pulse until finely chopped, 8 to 10 pulses. Add onion and pulse until onion is cut into ⅛- to ¼-inch pieces, 8 to 10 pulses. Transfer pancetta mixture to large Dutch oven. Pulse tomatoes in now-empty food processor until coarsely chopped, 8 to 10 pulses. Set aside.

2. Add oil to pancetta mixture in Dutch oven and cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until fond begins to form on bottom of pot, about 5 minutes. Add anchovy, pepper flakes, and rosemary and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in tomatoes, chickpeas and their liquid, water, and 1 teaspoon salt and bring to boil, scraping up any browned bits. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer for 10 minutes. Add pasta and cook, stirring frequently, until tender, 10 to 12 minutes. Stir in lemon juice and parsley and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve, passing Parmesan and extra oil separately.

Look: It's Supereasy

Video available free for 4 months
at CooksofIllustrated.com/dec15



Bringing Back Baked Alaska

The classic cake, ice cream, and meringue combo is a science experiment you can eat. Our modern, less-sweet version is one you'll actually enjoy.

➤ BY ANDREA GEARY ⇐

Baked Alaska is the unicorn of the dessert world; everyone has heard of it, but few have seen one in real life. Maybe that's because its three components—a circle of cake topped with a dome of ice cream and covered in meringue—make it sound too fussy to cobble together at home. Or maybe Baked Alaska seems intimidating since it appears to defy the laws of thermodynamics: Baking this dessert in a very hot oven browns and crisps the billowy meringue exterior while leaving the ice cream core frozen and firm. Some restaurants further heighten the drama by lowering the lights, dousing the creation with liqueur, and setting it ablaze at the table.

Nevertheless, the dessert is still basically a dressed-up ice cream cake, and it's no more difficult to make than any other version. My own reasons for not throwing one together more often have always been that Baked Alaska is very sweet, and the traditional bombe shape—while visually impressive when whole—is difficult to slice and serve neatly. Even if you do manage to cut neat slices, the meringue and ice cream invariably part company when you move the slices from the platter to dessert plates. My goal was to reengineer Baked Alaska so it would be as enjoyable to eat as it is impressive to behold.

Bombes That Bombed

My first move was to pick a style of meringue: French, Italian, or Swiss. With the French kind, the egg whites don't fully cook, and the result is relatively coarse and foamy. I prefer the other styles because the sugar completely dissolves. The results are creamier, denser, and more stable.

Ultimately, I chose the Swiss version, which is a bit easier to make. The basic method is to gently whisk egg whites and sugar in a bowl over simmering water (I cook it until the mixture reaches 160 degrees for food safety) and then whip it in a stand mixer until stiff peaks form.



➤ **Andrea Shows You How**
Video available free for 4 months
at CooksWithIllustrated.com/dec15



A trio of chocolate chiffon cake, coffee ice cream, and lightly sweetened meringue makes a memorable—and great-tasting—dessert.

As for the cake, Baked Alaska can be made with anything from a lean and airy genoise to a rich and tender pound cake to a brownie. I thought that the brownie sounded like a nice flavor and visual contrast to the meringue. Sticking with the traditional bombe shape for now, I baked a basic brownie in an 8-inch round pan and packed softened vanilla ice cream into a plastic wrap-lined bowl with the same diameter. To form the ice cream cake, I pressed the cooled brownie round onto the ice cream and popped the whole thing in the freezer. Once it was firm, I unmolded the cake and covered the surface with a thick layer of meringue (which was tricky, because it tended to slip down the surface of the ice cream). Finally, I baked the Alaska in a 500-degree oven for just a few minutes until the exterior was brown and crisp.

I was right—everyone liked the chocolate flavor and visual contrast of the brownie, but in combination with the ice cream and that thick coat of meringue, the whole package was much too sweet. Plus, the ice cream turned icy when I refroze it before baking. Decreasing the amount of meringue reduced some of that sweetness, but doing so came at a cost. When I baked off another Alaska covered with about half as much meringue, the ice cream core turned to soft-serve.

Foam Sweet Foam

Lesson learned: That voluminous meringue coat isn't there just for aesthetics. Its primary function is insulation. The meringue protects the ice cream at the center from melting in the heat of the oven.

Here's how it works: When egg whites are beaten, they form a foam—a liquid (egg whites are primarily water) that traps millions of tiny air bubbles and holds them together in a solid shape. Foams make great insulators because the air bubbles contain relatively few molecules and thus conduct heat energy poorly. The more meringue I used, the better the insulation would be.

If I couldn't reduce the amount of meringue, maybe I could at least make it less sweet by replacing $\frac{1}{4}$ of the sugar with corn syrup, which is less sweet.

Why It Doesn't Melt

How is it that ice cream wrapped in cake and covered in a layer of meringue can remain frozen solid for a good 5 minutes in a 500-degree oven? Meringue (and, to a lesser extent, cake) is full of tiny air bubbles that provide terrific insulation, since they conduct heat poorly. Heat causes molecules to vibrate and bump into one another, transferring energy. Since air bubbles contain fewer molecules, heat transfer is slow.

But recalibrating the meringue only marginally reduced the dessert's overall sweetness. To really make a difference, I would need to reduce the amount of meringue, too, which would bring me back to my compromised insulation problem. Or so I thought.

Splendid Insulation

Up until that point, I'd been relying almost exclusively on the meringue for insulation. But cakes are also foams with the ability to insulate, so maybe I could

make better use of that component. I'd actually seen a couple of Baked Alaska recipes in which the ice cream was completely encased in cake and had

dismissed them as overkill. Now I recognized this as a potentially genius move that would allow me to cut way back on the meringue while keeping the ice cream well insulated.

But in order to do so, I had to make some changes—starting with the type of cake. The brownie was not only too sweet but also too inflexible to encase the ice cream, so I switched to a chiffon cake. Because this cake is made with whipped egg whites, it's not only spongier and more flexible than a brownie but also contains much more air, making it a better insulator. (Its plain flavor wasn't an incentive, but I'd revisit that later.)

Using the more-resilient chiffon cake also allowed me to change the way I assembled my Baked Alaska. Rather than line a bowl with cake pieces and soft ice cream, which always resulted in icy ice cream and messy slicing, I abandoned the bombe shape

and instead turned the ice cream into a cylinder and wrapped cake around it.

First, I cut the cardboard off two pint containers of ice cream, pressed them together to form a cylinder, and stashed it in the freezer. To make a wide, flat cake that could be wrapped around the cylinder, I baked the chiffon batter in a rimmed baking sheet, cutting the cake into pieces that I used to encase the ice cream. I halved the cylinder lengthwise, placed the halves cut side down on another piece of cake, and placed my creation on a wire rack set in a rimmed baking sheet (to separate it from the sheet's surface, which would get hot in the oven). I spread the cake with just two inches of meringue, appreciating how much better it clung to the surface of the cake than it had to the ice cream, and baked it.

The final results were even more encouraging: Not only were there no drips of melted ice cream,

but the slices I cut were tidy and intact and the cross-section view was striking: a half circle of ice cream surrounded by cake and just enough meringue.

A Grown-Up Ice Cream Cake

All I had left to revisit was the flavor. Since the chocolate brownie had been a good match for the meringue, I made the chiffon cake chocolate by substituting cocoa for some of the cake flour.

To make the flavors even more complex, I tried a series of tart sorbets in place of the plain old vanilla ice cream; they had good flavor but were too lean. Instead, I used a premium coffee ice cream that was rich, creamy, and had just the right hint of bitterness—a great match for the other components.

My version of Baked Alaska wasn't just an edible science project about insulation; it was a showpiece dessert that tasted every bit as good as it looked.

TESTING Perfecting the Three Components

Conventional recipes for Baked Alaska often look impressive but tend to be achingly sweet and hard to slice neatly. We reengineered all three components, including wrapping the entire ice cream core in cake, which allowed us to use less meringue, for a dessert that looks and tastes great.

CAKE

All cakes insulated the ice cream from heat to varying degrees; genoise and chiffon cakes were the most effective because they contain more insulating air bubbles that keep the ice cream colder. Both chiffon and genoise were also resilient enough to be wrapped around the ice cream, but we chose chiffon for its slightly richer flavor and more tender texture.



POUND CAKE
Too dense to be effective



BROWNIE
Also not a great insulator



GENOISE
Airy but too lean



CHIFFON ★
Airy, moderately rich, resilient

MERINGUE

We wanted a creamy meringue that was easy to make. After experimenting with the three classic types, we chose a Swiss meringue and made it less cloying by replacing some of the sugar with corn syrup.



FRENCH
Easy to make, but grainy and not food-safe



ITALIAN
Creamy and smooth, but requires fussy hot syrup



SWISS ★
Creamy, smooth, and food-safe when cooked to 160 degrees

ICE CREAM

Our goal was a complex-tasting, not-too-sweet frozen core.



VANILLA ICE CREAM
Rich and creamy but too sweet



RASPBERRY SORBET
Bright-tasting but too lean



COFFEE ICE CREAM ★
Creamy with a hint of bitterness

Thermal Connection

Accounts vary, but many sources attribute the invention of Baked Alaska to Count von Rumford, an 18th-century physicist and pioneer of thermodynamics who is also credited with the invention of the double boiler, the modern kitchen range, and—most fittingly—thermal underwear. A popular version of the story is that Rumford's original name for the dessert, *omelette surprise*, changed decades later when chef Charles Ranhofer of Delmonico's in New York City dubbed it Baked Alaska in celebration of the United States' acquisition of the territory in 1867.



Bonus Baked Alaska



Our Baked Alaska recipe leaves just enough leftover cake and ice cream to make an additional for-two version. For our free recipe for Bonus Baked Alaska, go to CooksofIllustrated.com/dec15.

BAKED ALASKA

SERVES 8

Coffee ice cream provides the best contrast with sweet meringue in this recipe, but other flavors may be substituted, if desired. A high-quality ice cream such as Häagen-Dazs works best because it is slower to melt. To ensure the proper texture when serving, it is necessary to remove the cake from the freezer before making the meringue. This recipe leaves just enough leftover cake and ice cream to make an additional for-two version. For our free recipe for Bonus Baked Alaska, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec15.

2 (1-pint) containers coffee ice cream

Cake

- 1 cup (4 ounces) cake flour
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup (1 ounce) unsweetened cocoa powder
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup ($4\frac{2}{3}$ ounces) sugar
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons baking powder
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegetable oil
- 6 tablespoons water
- 4 large eggs, separated

Meringue

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup ($5\frac{1}{4}$ ounces) sugar
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup light corn syrup
- 3 large egg whites
- 2 tablespoons water
- Pinch salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Lay 12-inch square sheet of plastic wrap on counter and remove lids from ice cream. Use scissors to cut cardboard tubs from top to bottom. Peel away cardboard and discard. Place ice cream blocks on their sides in center of plastic with wider ends facing each other. Grasp each side of plastic and firmly press blocks together to form barrel shape. Wrap plastic tightly around ice cream and roll briefly on counter to form uniform cylinder. Place cylinder, standing on end, in freezer until completely solid, at least 1 hour.

2. **FOR THE CAKE:** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease 18 by 13-inch rimmed baking sheet, line with parchment paper, and lightly grease parchment. Whisk flour, cocoa, $\frac{1}{3}$ cup sugar, baking powder, and salt together in large bowl. Whisk oil, water, and egg yolks into flour mixture until smooth batter forms.

3. Using stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whip egg whites on medium-low speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Increase speed to medium-high and whip whites to soft, billowy mounds, about 1 minute. Gradually add remaining $\frac{1}{3}$ cup sugar and whip until glossy, soft peaks form, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer one-third of egg whites to batter; whisk gently until mixture is lightened. Using rubber spatula, gently fold remaining egg whites into batter.

4. Pour batter into prepared sheet; spread evenly. Bake until cake springs back when pressed lightly in

center, 10 to 13 minutes. Transfer cake to wire rack and let cool for 5 minutes. Run knife around edge of sheet, then invert cake onto wire rack. Carefully remove parchment, then reinvert cake onto second wire rack. Let cool completely, at least 15 minutes.

5. Transfer cake to cutting board with long side of rectangle parallel to edge of counter. Using serrated knife, trim $\frac{1}{4}$ inch off left side of cake and discard. Using ruler, measure $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches from cut edge and make mark with knife. Using mark as guide, cut $4\frac{1}{2}$ -inch rectangle from cake. Trim piece to create $4\frac{1}{2}$ by 11-inch rectangle and set aside. (Depending on pan size and how much cake has shrunk during baking, it may not be necessary to trim piece to measure 11 inches.) Measure 4 inches from new cut edge and make mark. Using mark as guide, cut 4-inch rectangle from cake. Trim piece to create 4 by 10-inch rectangle, wrap rectangle in plastic, and set aside. Cut $3\frac{1}{2}$ -inch round from remaining cake and set aside (biscuit cutter works well). Save scraps for Bonus Baked Alaska.

6. Unwrap ice cream. Trim cylinder to $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length and return remainder to freezer for Bonus Baked Alaska. Place ice cream cylinder on $4\frac{1}{2}$ by 11-inch cake rectangle and wrap cake around ice cream. (Cake may crack slightly.) Place cake circle on one end of cylinder. Wrap entire cylinder tightly in plastic. Place cylinder, standing on cake-covered end, in freezer until cake is firm, at least 30 minutes.

7. Unwrap cylinder and place on cutting board, standing on cake-covered end, and cut in half lengthwise. Unwrap reserved 4 by 10-inch cake rectangle and place halves on top, ice cream side down, with open ends meeting in middle. Wrap tightly with plastic and press ends gently to close gap between halves. Return to freezer for at least 2 hours and up to 2 weeks.

8. **FOR THE MERINGUE:** Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 500 degrees. Spray wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet with vegetable oil spray. Unwrap cake and place on rack. Combine sugar, corn syrup, egg whites, water, and salt in bowl of stand mixer; place bowl over saucepan filled with 1 inch simmering water, making sure that water does not touch bottom of bowl. Whisking gently but constantly, heat until sugar is dissolved and mixture registers 160 degrees, 5 to 8 minutes.

9. Place bowl in stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment. Beat mixture on medium speed until bowl is only slightly warm to touch, about 5 minutes. Increase speed to high and beat until mixture begins to lose its gloss and forms stiff peaks, about 5 minutes. Add vanilla and beat until combined.

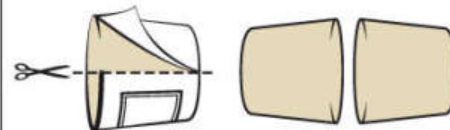
10. Using offset spatula, spread meringue over top and sides of cake, avoiding getting meringue on rack. Use back of spoon to create peaks all over meringue.

11. Bake until browned and crisp, about 5 minutes. Run offset spatula or thin knife under dessert to loosen from rack, then use two spatulas to transfer to serving platter. To slice, dip sharp knife in very hot water and wipe dry after each cut. Serve immediately.

STEP BY STEP ENGINEERING

A NEW BAKED ALASKA

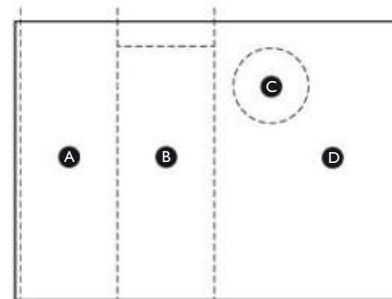
1. Cut ice cream tubs from top to bottom and peel away cardboard. Place blocks on plastic wrap on their sides with wider ends facing each other.



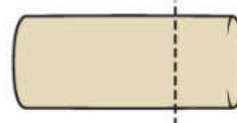
2. Wrap plastic tightly around ice cream and roll on counter to form even cylinder. Place in freezer, standing on end, for 1 hour.



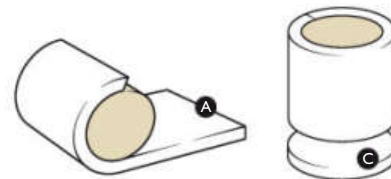
3. Trim $\frac{1}{4}$ inch off left side of cake. Cut $4\frac{1}{2}$ by 11-inch rectangle (A), 4 by 10-inch rectangle (B), and $3\frac{1}{2}$ -inch round (C). Save scraps (D) for Bonus Baked Alaska.



4. Unwrap ice cream and trim cylinder to $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length. Return remainder to freezer.



5. Place ice cream on $4\frac{1}{2}$ by 11-inch rectangle and wrap cake around ice cream. Place cake circle on one end of cylinder. Wrap in plastic. Freeze, standing on cake-covered end, for 30 minutes.



6. Unwrap cylinder, stand on cake-covered end, and cut in half lengthwise. Place halves on 4 by 10-inch rectangle, ice cream side down, with open ends meeting in middle.

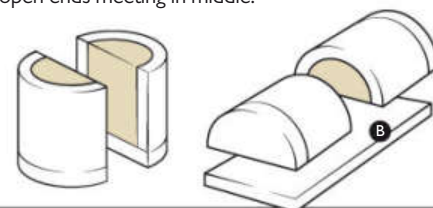


ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Like an Extra-Virgin?

Often dull or even rancid-tasting, supermarket olive oils never seem to live up to their extra-virgin designation. Have new industry standards improved the options?

➤ BY LISA McMANUS ➤

Olive oil, which is simply juice pressed from olives, tastes great when it's fresh. The highest grade, called extra-virgin, is lively, bright, and full-bodied at its best, with flavors that range from peppery to buttery depending on the variety of olives used and how ripe they are when harvested. (In general, an earlier harvest yields greener, more peppery oil; a later harvest results in a mellower, more golden oil.) But like any other fresh fruit, olives are highly perishable, and their pristine, complex flavor degrades quickly, which makes producing—and handling—a top-notch oil time-sensitive, labor-intensive, and expensive. But the results couldn't be more worth it. We use extra-virgin olive oil as a condiment on grilled meat, fish, vegetables, and pastas; a source of richness and body in soups and sauces; and a star player in vinaigrette.

Unfortunately, the supermarket extra-virgin olive oils we tasted seven years ago were wan facsimiles of the good stuff. Most were either as bland as vegetable oil or, worse, funky, overpowering, and stale. We learned that Americans were literally getting the bottom of the barrel, and a number of more recent articles and books have pointed out a big reason why: With no meaningful U.S. standards for olive oil, lower-quality oils found a ready market here. In fact, one widely reported 2010 University of California, Davis Olive Center study revealed that a whopping 69 percent of tested supermarket olive oils sold as “extra-virgin” actually weren't according to the standards set by the International Olive Council (IOC), the industry's worldwide governing body. They were in fact lesser grades being passed off at premium prices.

Since then, the U.S. olive oil industry has taken steps to be more stringent. California, where olive oil production has grown tenfold over the past decade, passed its own standards in 2008 and tightened them last year. And in 2010, after the UC Davis Olive Center study and at the urging of domestic producers, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) adopted chemical and sensory standards for olive oil grades similar to those established by the IOC. Among the chemical standards: An oil must not exceed certain levels of free fatty acids and peroxides, which would indicate olive deterioration, poor processing, and oxidation. To meet sensory criteria, an oil must taste not just flawless—or have what experts call “zero defects”—but also possess good fruity flavor.



To see if these new standards have led to better-quality oils in supermarkets, we decided to take a fresh look. We sampled 10 top-selling nationally available supermarket extra-virgin olive oils in a series of blind tastings: plain, with bread, over tomatoes and mozzarella, and in a vinaigrette served over salad greens. We also sent each of the oils to an independent laboratory for chemical evaluation and to 10 trained olive oil tasters to get a second opinion on their flavor quality.

Flavor Savers

Every stage of the process affects the quality of the oil. Producers must start with good fruit—that is, ripe olives that have been harvested carefully and aren't bruised or fermented—and get it to the mill as quickly as possible, before spoilage sets in. Extra-virgin olive oil (sometimes abbreviated EVOO) must also be pressed—or, in modern terms, spun out by a centrifuge to separate the water from the oil—with clean equipment that won't add impurities and

without using high heat or chemicals. While heat and chemicals extract more oil from the olives, it's at the cost of preserving important aromatics and antioxidants that help keep the oil fresh-tasting. That said, producing high-quality oil is only half the challenge. Because olive oil begins to degrade as soon as it's exposed to air, heat, and light, producers must transport and store it carefully to preserve its freshness.

Any of these factors might account for the fact that, while all the oils in our tasting did just pass the lab tests we commissioned (a limited spectrum of some of the same freshness and quality tests required by the IOC and USDA), only one passed all the tests with solid scores. The rest showed spotty results that weren't indicative of a truly fresh, high-quality oil. As for our sensory evaluations, these were even more discouraging. Both panels agreed that only two out of the 10 oils had good fruity flavor without off-notes. Our in-house panel found these remaining oils merely lackluster, but the experts were harsher

How Oil Gets Robbed of Its Extra-Virginity

In the multibillion dollar olive oil industry, there can be many detours on the way to true extra-virgin status.



BAD FRUIT

Bruised or fermented olives can lead to off-notes in oil.



IMPROPER PROCESSING

Use of high heat and chemicals extracts more oil but damages flavor.



ADULTERATION

To mask defects, some makers cut oil with tasteless, odorless refined olive oil.



SHODDY STORAGE

Heat, air, and light all make an oil degrade faster.



OLD AGE

Even under ideal conditions, all olive oils will oxidize and become rancid over time.

in their criticism. Oils that we deemed simply flat or dull they decried as borderline rancid or “fusty,” an industry term for a fermented taste.

When we spoke about these results with Alexandra Kicenik Devarenne, an independent California-based olive oil consultant and educator, judge in international olive oil competitions, and author of *Olive Oil: A Field Guide* (2014), she confirmed what we suspected: “If this had been an official panel tasting, the problems in these oils would make them a lower grade. They would be virgin, as opposed to extra-virgin.”

But how could so many sub-par oils labeled “extra-virgin” still appear in supermarkets, given the standards the USDA has put in place? The answer is simple: The standards aren’t enforced. In fact, they’re not enforced anywhere in the olive oil industry. A 2013 U.S. International Trade Commission report noted that even in Europe, the IOC standards are “widely unenforced,” allowing “a wide range of oil qualities to be marketed as extra-virgin.” (In the United States, a different reason might eventually force more compliance: Manufacturers of two of the oils in our lineup, Bertolli and Filippo Berio, are the targets of class-action suits for misleading labeling. Both have denied the claims.)

Standard bottling practices and “best by” dates also might be part of the problem. Devarenne explained that the oils in our lineup may have had the necessary flavor profile to qualify as extra-virgin when they were first pressed, but the fact that oils are commonly stored in stainless-steel tanks for multiple years and given a “best by” date from the time of bottling rather than harvest may have meant that they weren’t especially fresh by the time we tasted them.

For Devarenne, the issue with most of the oils we tasted is not that they don’t have a place in the kitchen—she thinks most would be acceptable as cooking oils rather than condiment oils, and we agree. Instead, it’s what she calls “the ‘truth in labeling’ thing.” “If, overnight, all of the olive oil in the supermarket magically relabeled itself to accurately reflect

what was inside the bottle, we would have a vigorous trade in virgin grade olive oil in this country,” she said. Instead, mislabeling cheapens the consumer’s impression of what a real extra-virgin oil should be.

Consider the Source

So what about those better-quality oils in our lineup? Our runner-up was from Lucini, a supermarket brand of extra-virgin we’ve liked in the past. Our top-ranking sample was from California Olive Ranch, the winner of our 2009 tasting of California extra-virgin olive oil. The latter stood out for its “fragrant,” “complex,” and “fruity” flavors. Not surprisingly, it also was the oil that bested the others in our chemical tests. So what does California Olive Ranch do differently that makes their product better than the others? Mostly, it boils down to the company’s control over every stage of the production process, which preserves the freshness of the oil as much as possible.

It starts with the source. Six of the 10 brands we tasted are sourced from multiple regions—and from one to as many as 11 different countries—which increases the likelihood that the oils were collected from a price-driven global bulk market that prioritizes cheap, not high-quality, oil. Conversely, California Olive Ranch, the lone domestic oil in our tasting, is made from olives that are grown within 150 miles of the pressing and bottling facility. The company knows exactly what types of olives go into its oils and is willing to share the information, whereas the bottlers of some lower-ranking brands wouldn’t reveal the varieties used in their products, making us wonder if they even tracked such information (one brand admitted that it didn’t).

Second, the company uses a relatively new growing and harvesting process called super-high-density planting, in which the trees are planted together much more tightly than they would be in traditional groves. As a result, the olives can be harvested by machines more efficiently than they would be if they were picked by hand or shaken into nets on the ground.

(Speed is of the essence, since olives begin to change flavor from the moment they are separated from the tree and must be pressed as quickly as possible to ensure they retain the desired flavor profile.) Then, by bottling very close to the source, the company cuts out the risk that the oil oxidizes and spoils during transport to another facility. And unlike some producers that sell their oil in clear glass or even plastic bottles, which expose the oil to more damaging light, California Olive Ranch uses dark-green glass bottles that help shield the oil. The upshot of all these factors: fresher and cheaper olive oil.

We hope we’ll be seeing more choices like California Olive Ranch Extra Virgin Olive Oil on supermarket shelves. While it costs more than mediocre oils from industrial bottlers like last-placed Bertolli (\$0.59 per ounce compared to \$0.36), it’s far less expensive than our high-end extra-virgin favorite from Columela, which costs \$1.12 per ounce. (We even found these oils comparable when we tasted them side by side.) In fact, its price is so reasonable that we can use it as a condiment, but we won’t feel bad about also using it in cooking.

SHOPPING

Indications of a Fresher Oil

These three things can help you assess the quality of an extra-virgin olive oil before you buy it.

HARVEST DATE

Since a “best by” date might be 24 to 32 months after the oil was bottled and 1 to 2 years after it was pressed, a harvest date is a more precise indication of freshness. Look for the most recent date, and note that in Europe and the United States, olives are harvested in the fall and winter, so most bottles will list the previous year.

DARK GLASS

Avoid clear glass; dark glass shields the oil from damaging light. Avoid clear plastic, too; it’s not a good barrier to light or air.

OIL ORIGIN

Bottlers often print where their oil has been sourced from on the label; look for oil that has been sourced from a single country.

TASTING SUPERMARKET EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL

We tasted 10 top-selling extra-virgin olive oils plain, with bread, over tomatoes and mozzarella, and in vinaigrette, rating the oils on their fruity, fresh, bitter, and peppery flavors and overall appeal. Information about source, olive varieties, and bottling location were obtained from manufacturers. We also had the oils tested at an independent laboratory for quality and freshness. (An independent group of trained olive oil tasters conducted a separate double-blind tasting of the oils, but we didn't factor their assessment into our rankings.) Results were averaged and products appear below in order of preference.



RECOMMENDED

CALIFORNIA OLIVE RANCH Everyday Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$9.99 for 500 ml (\$0.59 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETIES: Arbequina, Arbosana, Koroneiki

SOURCE: Northern California

BOTTLED IN: Artois, California

COMMENTS: "Fruity," "fragrant," and "fresh" with a "complex finish," this top-ranked oil is a supermarket standout. In fact, its flavor rivaled that of our favorite high-end extra-virgin oil. Not surprisingly, its lab scores for freshness and quality were also better than the other brands across the board.

"Rivals the flavor of our favorite high-end EVOO."

RECOMMENDED

LUCINI Premium Select Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$20.99 for 500 ml (\$1.24 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETIES: Frantoio, Moraiolo, Leccino, Maurino, and Pendolino

SOURCE: Tuscany and Central Italy

BOTTLED IN: Tuscany

COMMENTS: Drizzled over tomatoes and mozzarella and as a dip for bread, this pricey Italian oil—our former supermarket favorite—tasted "incredibly rich," "bright," and "buttery" with a pleasantly "peppery aftertaste," though those flavors became somewhat muted in vinaigrette. There, it was deemed "subtle."



RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

COLAVITA Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Premium Italian

PRICE: \$18.99 for 34 oz (\$0.56 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETY: Coratina (other varieties included to lesser extent, to temper bitterness)

SOURCE: Italy

BOTTLED IN: Pomezia, Italy

COMMENTS: With a "fresh, light, green taste" and a "mildly peppery finish," this oil earned acceptable but not stellar scores. Several tasters deemed it "mild—just OK," especially in vinaigrette, where it was a little too "neutral."



GOYA Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$5.99 for 17 oz (\$0.35 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETIES: Hojiblanca, Lechin, Picual, Arbequina, Picudo, Cacereña, and Manzanilla

SOURCE: Andalucía, Spain

BOTTLED IN: Andalucía

COMMENTS: Notes for this Spanish oil ranged from "balanced, but mild" and "middle-of-the-road" to just plain "boring." In vinaigrette, it made a "mellow and balanced dressing, but has no real distinct EVOO flavor."



RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS CONTINUED

BOTTICELLI Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$8.99 for 25.3 oz (\$0.36 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETIES: Arbequina, Arbosana, Koroneiki

SOURCE: Italy, Spain, Greece, Tunisia

BOTTLED IN: Italy

COMMENTS: On its own, this blended oil tasted "mild" and "not that fresh" with a "bitter aftertaste"; in vinaigrette, it came across as "fine" but "heavy" and without "much character to it." As one taster summed it up, "it could be any old regular oil off the shelf."



FILIPPO BERIO Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$5.99 for 16.9 oz (\$0.35 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETIES: Proprietary information

SOURCE: Italy, Spain, Greece, and Tunisia

BOTTLED IN: Massarosa (Lucca), Italy

COMMENTS: While a few tasters appreciated this oil's "slight peppery aftertaste" and even found it "smooth" in vinaigrette, many others detected "medicinal," "vinegary" notes and a "greasy consistency"—possible signs that the olives weren't processed quickly enough after picking or that the oil was on the verge of going rancid.



OLIVARI Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$6.99 for 17 oz (\$0.41 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETIES: Special blend; proprietary information

SOURCE: Italy, Greece, Spain, Turkey, Tunisia, and Morocco

BOTTLED IN: New York

COMMENTS: Disappointingly, this oil's "bright [and] fruity" aroma gave way to a "flat," "thin" flavor that "dissipates quickly." Over tomatoes and mozzarella, it tasted more "punchy" but still "a little stale," even though the "best by" date was more than a year away.



STAR Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$9.99 for 500 ml (\$0.59 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETIES: Company does not track, saying, "There are many varieties grown in the countries we source from."

SOURCE: Spain, Italy, Greece, and Tunisia

BOTTLED IN: Spain and Tunisia

COMMENTS: This "acceptable but not distinctive" oil "smelled brighter, grassier, and more peppery than it tasted." In vinaigrette, it was "lost in other flavors" and offered little more than a "greasy mouthfeel."



POMPEIAN Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$12.99 for 32 oz (\$0.41 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETIES: Arbosana, Koroneiki, Coratina, Arbequina, Picual, Frantoio, Picholine, and Hojiblanca

SOURCE: May include Italy, Greece, Spain, Argentina, Tunisia, Turkey, Morocco, Chile, United States, Uruguay, Portugal

BOTTLED IN: Maryland

COMMENTS: This oil was "neutral" and "timid" at best; one taster even said, "Nothing. I've got nothing here." But the more alarming comments were about its off-flavors—"metallic," "soapy," and "acidic" among them.



BERTOLLI Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$8.99 for 25 oz (\$0.36 per oz)

OLIVE VARIETIES: Proprietary blend

SOURCE: Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Morocco, Tunisia, Chile, Argentina, and Australia

BOTTLED IN: Italy and Spain

COMMENTS: Straight out of the bottle, this oil's "dull" flavor and "quick finish" left tasters underwhelmed—and unlike many other samples, its flavor didn't improve much when it met up with other ingredients. It tasted "greasy and flat" with tomatoes and mozzarella, and tasters found it boring in vinaigrette. "Nothing special. Could be vegetable oil in here."



Finding a Good Oven Thermometer

An oven thermometer is the only reliable way to know what's happening inside your oven—unless you have a model that's inaccurate, hard to read, or falls off the racks.

➤ BY KATE SHANNON ➤

For reliable, consistent results with recipes, a good oven thermometer is critical. When we used a high-tech digital thermometer to take the temperature of five different home ovens preheated to 350 degrees, some missed the mark by as much as 50 degrees. Here's one big reason why: An oven's internal thermometer only gauges the temperature of the location where it's installed, which is necessarily in an out-of-the-way spot in the back, front, or side of the oven box. But these areas can be subject to hot spots or drafts that make their temperatures differ from the center of the oven. Only a good freestanding oven thermometer can tell you what's really going on right in the middle of the oven, where most food cooks.

For several years, we've relied on our winning dial-face oven thermometer from Cooper-Atkins, but we've also noticed new models on the market and wondered if anything better had come along. We scooped up nine dial-face models priced from \$4.63 to \$20.94 to pit against it. (We avoided bulb models since we've found that their tinted alcohol can get stuck and give inaccurate readings.) Most of our lineup had the option to hang from the racks or sit upright. Either way, we wanted a thermometer that was easy to position and remove for a periodic reading. In addition to ease of use, we rated the legibility of the faces and, most importantly, the models' accuracy. Finally, to assess quality control, we purchased four copies of each thermometer and ran the entire set through testing.

Temperature Trackers

An unreliable oven thermometer is worse than none at all, so we started by evaluating each brand's accuracy at 250, 350, and 450 degrees, using the same oven for all of our tests. We clipped a lab-grade thermocouple to the center of the middle oven rack and arranged all four copies of a model closely



Do 25 Degrees Really Matter?

A number of the products in our lineup have a logo on their packaging and/or the thermometer itself showing that they have been tested by the independent certification organization NSF International and meet standard requirements. The problem is, those standards allow a thermometer to be off by as much as 25 degrees—just the variance we found in some of our brands. To see the impact of such a discrepancy, we baked popovers in ovens that we set to 25 degrees above and below the desired initial temperature of 450 degrees. The popovers in the too-cold oven didn't rise properly, while those in the too-hot oven were misshapen and overly dark.

around the probe. We then compared their readings to the thermacouple's.

All dial-face thermometers work by the same internal mechanism. A bimetallic strip (that is, two pieces of different metals pressed together) is wound into a tight coil and connected to a tiny dial. The two metals expand and contract at different rates when heated or cooled, moving the dial on the face. As simple a mechanism as this is, quality controls clearly vary from factory to factory. With three products, one out of the four copies faltered, registering temperatures 10 to 25 degrees off the real oven temperature.

Easy Reading

Most of the models in our lineup had thin, flat bases designed to sit atop the oven racks. Models with bases less than 2¼ inches wide were difficult to position and prone to tipping over. We found similar fault with two models with clamp-like bases designed to clip onto the grates. The space between the open jaws of the clamp was too narrow to slide over the racks in all five of the different oven styles we tested. At best, they slid on crooked and were difficult to read. At

worst, they fell off completely and landed on the oven floor. After one such tumble, the silicone backing on one model melted and warped. The glass face of another top-heavy model cracked when it hit the oven floor.

Finally, we focused our attention on how easy it was to read each model with the oven door open and closed. Our testers favored models that had minimal markings beyond 50- and 25-degree indications, since having more tick marks made them harder to read, and the extra marks were unnecessary anyway. We also knocked off points on models with metal casings that obscured the numbers or cast long shadows on them, forcing us to crouch or squint to read the temperature.

In the end, nearly half our lineup failed to meet our basic criteria for legibility and stability. Add to that the three models that faltered in our accuracy tests, and we were left with just four oven thermometers that met our expectations. Of these, the CDN Pro Accurate Oven Thermometer (\$8.70) earned the top marks. It has large temperature markings and a simple, streamlined face—plus, a wide base that fits securely on all types of oven racks without fiddling or fussing. It's our new winner, and one that we'll be keeping within easy reach to check our own ovens.

Put Your Thermometer Where the Food Is

Many cooks let their oven thermometer live in the oven in an out-of-the-way place where they can check it every time they cook. This is actually unnecessary (with typical home use, an oven's accuracy should remain relatively consistent over time). A better approach: Periodically check your oven's basic accuracy. Place your thermometer in the middle of the center rack, where most food cooks. As a benchmark, set the oven to 350 degrees. After the oven indicates that it has preheated, check the thermometer's reading. (But don't wait too long—ovens cycle off and on to maintain a stable temperature.) Remove the thermometer and adjust the temperature setting accordingly the next time you cook. Repeat the process every three to six months.



• Lisa Explains It All

Video available free for 4 months at Cook'sIllustrated.com/dec15

KEY

GOOD ★★★

FAIR ★★

POOR ★

TESTING OVEN THERMOMETERS

We tested 10 dial-face thermometers, priced from \$4.63 to \$20.94, all with a temperature range of at least 150 to 500 degrees Fahrenheit. Prices shown were paid online. Models appear in order of preference.

ACCURACY

We weighed this criterion most heavily in our rankings. We tested four units of each model in ovens set to 250, 350, and 450 degrees Fahrenheit, using a lab-grade thermocouple to assess their accuracy. Models lost points if one unit was off by more than 10 degrees.

EASE OF USE

We rated each model on how easy it was to position and remove and on its stability on the rack. Thermometers lost points if they tipped over, fell off the rack, or were difficult to install.

LEGIBILITY

We evaluated how easy it was to see the thermometers' temperature readings with the oven door open and closed. Models with sharp color contrast and clear temperature indications fared best.

RECOMMENDED

CDN
Pro Accurate Oven Thermometer

MODEL: DOT2

PRICE: \$8.70

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 150–550 F

COMMENTS: All copies of this model aced our accuracy tests. It sports a wide, sturdy base and clear temperature markings with large numbers and boldly visible dashes at 50- and 25-degree increments. Its silver face is more prone to glare and light reflection than models with white backgrounds, but it's still fairly easy to read.

ACCURACY ★★★
EASE OF USE ★★★
LEGIBILITY ★★½

**TAYLOR**
TruTemp Thermometer

MODEL: 3506

PRICE: \$6.10

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 100–600 F

COMMENTS: As with our winner, all units of this model gave consistently accurate readings. Testers appreciated the large display and the color indications (cooler temperatures are shaded in blue and hotter in red), but we found its tiny dashes denoting temperature increments of less than 25 and 50 degrees distracting.

ACCURACY ★★★
EASE OF USE ★★★
LEGIBILITY ★★



RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

POLDER
Commercial Oven Thermometer

MODEL: THM-550N PRICE: \$7.19

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 50–500 F



ACCURACY ★★★
EASE OF USE ★★★
LEGIBILITY ★½

This thermometer was small but mighty, providing readings that matched the oven's ambient temperature in test after test. When we looked at it straight on, the numbered markings were clear as day. But its metal casing obscured some numbers entirely and cast shadows on others, posing serious problems for tall cooks and frustrating even our more petite testers.

COOPER-ATKINS
Dial Oven Thermometer

MODEL: 24HP-01-I PRICE: \$4.63

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 100–600 F



ACCURACY ★★★
EASE OF USE ★★★
LEGIBILITY ★½

Our old winner continued to impress us with consistently accurate temperature readings and a wide, sturdy base. But the metal casing hid some numbers from view, drawing criticism especially from taller testers. The food safety instructions printed on the bottom of the face were distracting.

NOT RECOMMENDED

WILLIAMS-SONOMA
Oven Thermometer

MODEL: 21-402469I PRICE: \$19.95

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 150–600 F



ACCURACY ★★★
EASE OF USE 0
LEGIBILITY ★★

We found no faults with the accuracy of this thermometer, and we liked how its numbers are located close to the center of the face, where they never became obscured by shadows. But its clamp-like clip was incompatible with every oven grate we tried. Frustrated testers struggled to clip it on facing forward and often watched with dismay as it fell forward or swiveled sideways.

NORPRO Oven Thermometer

MODEL: 5973 PRICE: \$7.97

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 150–600 F



ACCURACY ★★★
EASE OF USE ★
LEGIBILITY 0

The accuracy of this model wasn't enough to offset its flaws: Its slim base, just 1 ¾ inches across, is just barely bigger than the gaps between most oven grates and required painstaking placement so it didn't tip into the grates. The positioning of numbers between temperature increments (instead of directly over them) made it impossible to read at a glance.

TAYLOR
Connoisseur Oven Thermometer

MODEL: 503 PRICE: \$13.22

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 150–600 F



ACCURACY ★★★
EASE OF USE 0
LEGIBILITY ½

Though this thermometer gave consistently accurate readings, it had a clamp-like clip (in place of a traditional flat base) that was difficult to slide onto the grates in all five different styles of oven we tested it in. It routinely clipped on crooked or fell over, making its otherwise bright, easy-to-read face illegible. The silicone backing on one unit melted and warped when it fell onto the oven floor.

TAYLOR
Oven Thermometer

MODEL: 5932 PRICE: \$6.90

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 100–600 F



ACCURACY ★
EASE OF USE ★★★
LEGIBILITY ★★★

One unit of this model was off by 25-degree variations in two accuracy tests. It's too bad, because the temperature markings are easy to read, and its wide base easily supports its extra-large face.

MAVERICK
Oven Thermometer

MODEL: OT-01 PRICE: \$12.00

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 100–600 F



ACCURACY ★
EASE OF USE ★★★
LEGIBILITY ★

One copy of this thermometer gave readings 10 to 25 degrees below the actual oven temperature in all three temperature tests. The model is also quite small, with tiny numbers that are often obscured by its metal casing or hidden in shadows, but it did sit securely on the oven rack.

MAVERICK
Large Dial Oven Thermometer

MODEL: OT-02 PRICE: \$20.94

TEMPERATURE RANGE: 100–600 F



ACCURACY ★
EASE OF USE ★
LEGIBILITY ★★★

Like its sibling, this thermometer faltered in accuracy. One unit was off by 25 degrees in two temperature tests. The base also couldn't support the weight of its oversized face, and it toppled over enough times to crack one unit's glass front. With these flaws, we didn't care that it was easy to read.

INGREDIENT NOTES

➤ BY ANDREA GEARY, LAN LAM & ANNIE PETITO ➤

Tasting Multigrain Gluten-Free Sandwich Bread

In a recent tasting of white gluten-free loaves, we were hard-pressed to find any we could recommend. Would branching out beyond white bread provide better options? We bought nine brands of multigrain and whole-grain gluten-free sandwich bread, sampling them plain and toasted with butter, and were pleasantly surprised by two of the options.

Our top-ranked bread had plenty of salt, while the two lowest-ranked breads contained the least. Our favorite was also one of two breads with the highest level of fat, helping to create a crumb that was fluffy and moist. It was also the only bread to add baking soda, while the runner-up added baking powder. In addition to boosting lift, both leaveners produce flavorful browning through the Maillard reaction for a better-tasting loaf.

But here's the catch: To be labeled "multigrain" (whether gluten-free or traditional), breads only have to contain more than one type of grain—and that can be in the form of refined flours lacking the fibrous bran and nutrient-rich germ. Our favorite "multigrain" gluten-free bread, Glutino Gluten Free Multigrain Bread, actually contains no fiber or protein at all, a clear sign that it contains no whole grains. Meanwhile, our second-place bread, Three Bakers 7 Ancient Grains Whole Grain Bread, Gluten-Free, contains 4 grams of protein and 10 grams of fiber in a 100-gram serving.

For a loaf with texture and flavor that resembles traditional bread, choose Glutino Gluten Free Multigrain Bread. In fact, it might be the best choice for anyone looking for a "white" gluten-free sandwich bread (we preferred it to the white gluten-free loaves we tasted). For bread with whole-grain fiber, Three Bakers 7 Ancient Grains Whole Grain Bread, Gluten-Free is a flavorful option. For complete testing results, go to CookIllustrated.com/dec15. —Lisa McManus

RECOMMENDED

GLUTINO Gluten Free Multigrain Bread

PRICE: \$5.49 for a 14.1-ounce loaf (\$0.39 per oz)

COMMENTS: With the most salt of all the breads we tasted, one of the highest fat contents, and good browning on the crust, this loaf had a flavor advantage. It also had the best texture. "It has chew and some structure" with an interior that was "fluffy and light, almost like challah." Overall, as one happy taster wrote, "Miles better than the others."

THREE BAKERS 7 Ancient Grains Whole Grain Bread, Gluten-Free

PRICE: \$5.99 for a 17-ounce loaf (\$0.35 per oz)

COMMENTS: With "a yeasty, rich flavor," a "crust that is very chewy," and "seeds and grains (that) add interest," this bread, with its "very open crumb," was appealing to many tasters. Toasted, it had "nice crunch and chew" but became "gummy in the middle."



Comparing Kale

Three types of kale are commonly available in supermarkets—black (also known as dinosaur, cavolo nero, Lacinato, or Tuscan), curly (also known as Scottish or green), and red (also known as Russian Red or Winter Red). To examine their differences, we sampled the greens braised and in a salad that called for soaking the raw leaves in a warm water bath to tenderize them. While they all had pleasant flavor, we preferred the tenderness of black and curly kale. Red kale was too tough to enjoy, even when braised. —A.P.

BLACK KALE
Raw: sweet, mineral-y, tender
Braised: robust, rich



CURLY KALE
Raw: pungent, grassy
Braised: nutty, tender



RED KALE
Raw: vegetal, leathery
Braised: vegetal, tough



Cracking the Cocoa Nib

Cocoa nibs are the fermented, roasted, and cracked pieces of cacao beans that manufacturers process to make chocolate. They are dry and crunchy and have the bitterness of unsweetened chocolate or coffee, tempered by a slightly fruity acidity. Cocoa nibs don't melt when heated, but their cocoa butter comes to the surface. While they can be sprinkled on oatmeal or yogurt or cooked into a chili, they are usually incorporated in baked goods. In tests, we found that they are best suited to applications like banana bread where there aren't a lot of other competing flavors (or textures), although we did like them a lot in a granola made with dried cherries and almonds. Use $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{2}{3}$ cup of cocoa nibs per 9-cup batch of granola, loaf of quick bread, or dozen muffins. —L.L.

Chestnuts: Buying and Shelling

Chestnuts are available jarred and canned, but we've found that processing causes them to lose their rich, nutty flavor and take on a molasses-y sweetness. For that reason, we recommend using fresh chestnuts when they are available in the fall or early winter. Look for nuts with glossy shells, a sign of freshness and proper storage. Also choose nuts that do not rattle when shaken, as this indicates that they have dried out.

To shell 1 pound of chestnuts: Cut whole nuts in half crosswise, then blanch for 8 minutes in 8 cups boiling water. Turn off heat; leave nuts in water. One at a time, hold nut with a folded towel and squeeze shell to extract nut. Using paring knife, trim any bits of husk. One pound of chestnuts will yield roughly 10 ounces of nutmeats. —L.L.



EASY SQUEEZE
Extract nutmeats by squeezing blanched nuts.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGONYE, JAY LAYMAN

Cut Your Own Salmon Fillets

When making Miso-Marinated Salmon (page 18) or any salmon recipe that calls for fillets, it's important to use fillets of similar thickness so that they cook at the same rate. We find that the best way to ensure uniformity is to buy a large center-cut fillet (1½ to 2 pounds if serving 4) and cut it into 4 equal pieces. —A.P.



FOR EVEN COOKING, CUT PORTIONS AT HOME

The Nicest Rice for Pudding

Rice pudding is usually made with long-grain rice, but we wondered if it could be improved by swapping in Arborio or sushi rice. Since these short-grain rices have a high proportion of amylopectin—the starch that makes risotto creamy and sushi rice cling—could they make a more luxurious, creamier rice pudding?

To find out, we compared stovetop rice pudding (served cold) made with long-grain rice, Arborio rice, and sushi rice. Some tasters objected to the softness and lack of “bite” in the sushi rice grains, while Arborio was panned for contributing a slight grittiness. Turns out this is due to a genetic “defect” in their cores called chalk that never softens completely. It's what gives risotto a desirable al dente texture, but we found it unwelcome in pudding.

For pudding with a creamy texture boasting rice with a pleasant, mild chew, long-grain rice is still the best choice. That's because it contains a good amount of a starch called amylose that retrogrades, or rearranges into crystalline structures, when the rice turns cold, giving it the chew sushi rice lacks without making it too firm. —A.G.

Flavoring Whipped Cream

A small amount of extract or ground spices can be whisked into whipped cream to dress it up, but we wanted a way to infuse the flavor of ingredients like citrus zest, herbs, or tea leaves so that their texture wouldn't be distracting.

Heating the cream with the flavoring will extract the most flavor, but the strained cream won't whip to the proper volume unless it's chilled long enough for most of its fat to resolidify. Refrigerating overnight is an option, but we found a faster approach. To make 2 cups of whipped cream:



1. Heat ¼ cup heavy cream to 125° over medium heat.
2. Off heat, add flavoring.
3. Steep for 10 minutes, then strain.
4. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.
5. Whip ¾ cup heavy cream until starting to thicken. Add infused cream and sugar to taste; whip to soft peaks.

INGREDIENT	AMOUNT	PAIRINGS
TEA LEAVES	2 tablespoons	Earl Grey–Berries, Jasmine–Chocolate
CITRUS ZEST	½ teaspoon	Lemon or Lime–Berries, Orange–Chocolate, Lemon–Almond
MINCED HERBS	2 tablespoons	Rosemary–Lemon, Basil–Peach, Mint–Chocolate

DIY RECIPE Marshmallows

Homemade marshmallows are easy to make. Simply heat up a sugar mixture and beat it with unflavored gelatin until the mixture transforms from a translucent liquid into a white, fluffy goo. Spread this into a pan (we line it with greased foil for easy removal), let it set up, and cut it into cubes. The gelatin is key for structure. Without it, you'd end up with something like marshmallow crème. Serve with our Hot Chocolate Mix (November/December 2014), or cut them into mini marshmallows to use in our 15-Minute Rocky Road Fudge (January/February 2007). —Louise Emerick

MARSHMALLOWS

MAKES 117 MARSHMALLOWS

You will need a candy thermometer or another thermometer such as an instant-read probe model that registers high temperatures for this recipe.

- ⅔ cup (2⅔ ounces) confectioners' sugar
- ⅓ cup cornstarch
- 1 cup cold water
- 2½ tablespoons unflavored gelatin
- ⅔ cup light corn syrup
- 2 cups (14 ounces) granulated sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract



JUST RIGHT

When the mixture is thick enough to coat the whisk, it will set up firm.

1. Make foil sling for 13 by 9-inch baking pan by folding 2 long sheets of aluminum foil; first sheet should be 13 inches wide and second sheet should be 9 inches wide. Lay sheets of foil in pan perpendicular to each other, with extra foil hanging over edges of pan. Push foil into corners and up sides of pan, smoothing foil flush to pan. Spray pan with vegetable oil spray. Whisk confectioners' sugar and cornstarch in small bowl; set aside.

2. Pour ½ cup water into bowl of stand mixer fitted with whisk. Sprinkle gelatin over water. Let stand until gelatin becomes very firm, about 15 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, combine remaining ½ cup water and corn syrup in medium saucepan. Pour granulated sugar and salt into center of saucepan (do not let sugar hit saucepan sides). Bring to boil over medium-high heat and cook, gently swirling saucepan, until sugar has dissolved completely and mixture registers 240 degrees, 6 to 8 minutes.

4. Turn mixer speed to low and carefully pour hot syrup into gelatin mixture, avoiding whisk and bowl. Gradually increase speed to high and

whip until mixture is very thick and stiff and coats whisk, 10 to 12 minutes, scraping down bowl as needed. Add vanilla and mix until incorporated, about 15 seconds.

5. Working quickly, scrape mixture evenly into prepared pan using greased rubber spatula and smooth top. Sift 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar mixture over pan. Cover and let sit overnight at room temperature until firm.

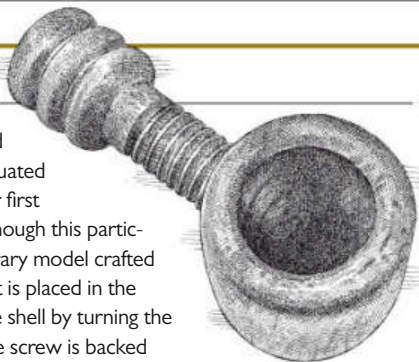
6. Lightly dust cutting board with 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar mixture and lightly coat chef's knife with oil spray. Turn marshmallow slab out onto cutting board and peel off foil. Sift 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar mixture over slab. Cut into 1-inch-wide strips, then cut crosswise into 1-inch squares. Working with 3 or 4 marshmallows at a time, toss marshmallows in bowl with remaining confectioners' sugar mixture, then toss in fine-mesh strainer to remove excess powder. Marshmallows can be stored in zipper-lock bag or airtight container for up to 2 weeks.

KITCHEN NOTES

➤ BY ANDREA GEARY, ANDREW JANJIGIAN, LAN LAM & ANNIE PETITO ➤

WHAT IS IT?

It might look like an old-fashioned toy, but this gadget is a screw-actuated nutcracker. The screw nutcracker first appeared in the 17th century, although this particular version is a more contemporary model crafted in the early 1950s. To use it, a nut is placed in the cup and pressure is applied to the shell by turning the screw. When the shell breaks, the screw is backed out to allow access to the nutmeat. When we gave it a try, we found that it worked exceedingly well. Moderate pressure applied to the screw easily cracked any nut—from walnuts, almonds, and pecans to hazelnuts and Brazil nuts. —Steve Dunn



SCREW-ACTUATED NUTCRACKER

Though rudimentary in appearance, this tool made easy work of cracking a variety of nutshells.

Ensuring Weight and Temperature Accuracy

Small inaccuracies in measuring temperature and weight can lead to problems like overcooked roasts and cookies that spread too much, so it's important to routinely test scales and thermometers to make sure that they are accurate. Here's how to do it. —A.G.

SCALE

If your scale measures in both grams and ounces, testing in grams will provide a more accurate assessment. One nickel should weigh 5 grams. If you are testing in ounces, 4 quarters and 1 nickel should weigh 1 ounce. If your scale is off and cannot be calibrated (check the manufacturer's instructions), write the discrepancy on a piece of masking tape and affix it to the scale so you can take it into account when you weigh.

THERMOMETER

A thermometer can be tested in boiling water, which should register 212 degrees at sea level, or in a glass of ice filled with just enough water to reach the top of the ice, which should register 32 degrees. For the most definitive results, test both ways. As with your scale, either calibrate according to the manufacturer's instructions or make a note of any discrepancy.

COOKING LESSON The Solution to Searing Meat

When cooking meat, including recipes like our Roasted Rack of Lamb with Roasted Red Pepper Relish (page 5), we've found that the best way to achieve a rosy pink interior and nicely browned exterior is to roast the meat in a low oven until nearly done and then sear it on a very hot stove. The low oven's gentle heat ensures a smaller temperature gradient between the center and exterior of the meat, so the meat cooks through evenly from edge to edge; the stove's intense heat then rapidly browns just the surface so there's no time for the meat beneath it to overcook.

Browning meat via this oven-to-stove method may be a bit more work than simply turning up the oven temperature or blasting the meat under the broiler, but here's why it's better than either of those methods. —L.L.

Why Not a Hot Oven?

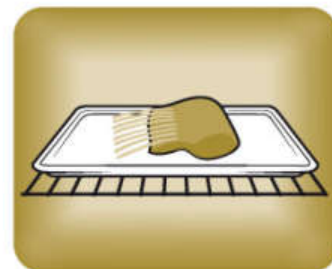
Air is an inefficient conductor of heat, so even if the oven is cranked to 500 degrees, the surface of the meat won't brown quickly enough before the interior overcooks.

Why Not the Broiler?

Broilers produce radiant heat waves that brown the top of food rapidly. But they also heat up the air inside the oven, so the other sides of the meat will absorb that heat at the same time and overcook the interior.

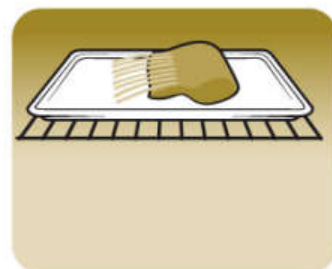
Why the Stove?

Searing meat in a very hot skillet conducts heat directly to only the side of the meat in contact with the pan. The other sides of the meat aren't exposed to additional heat, so they don't continue cooking. The result: a great crust without a band of overcooked meat beneath it.



CONVECTION: INEFFICIENT

Transfers heat poorly so browning falls short.



RADIANT: OVERKILL

Browns well but heats the oven's air, causing overcooking.

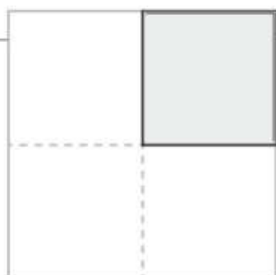


CONDUCTION: DIRECT

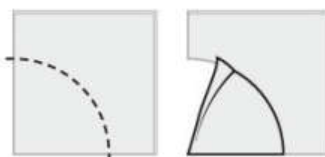
Quickly browns only what's in contact with the pan for perfect results.

HOMEMADE PIE SHIELD

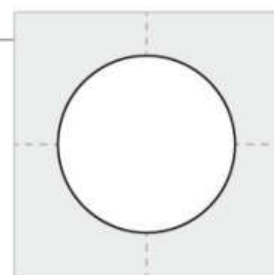
Sometimes the edges of a pie get too brown before the rest of the pie is finished cooking. The standard advice for dealing with the situation is to crimp strips of foil around the affected areas, but it's easier said than done because the pie plate is perilously hot. And the strips of foil have a tendency to fall off as the pie is returned to the oven. We've devised a much easier method. We cut a circle out of a square piece of foil and then place that square on top of the pie. —A.G.



1. For 9-inch pie, fold 12-inch square piece of foil in half and then in half again to make 6-inch square.



2. Working with folded corner as reference point, make two marks, one on each folded side, 4 inches from corner. Draw curved line connecting marks to form quarter circle. Tear foil along line.

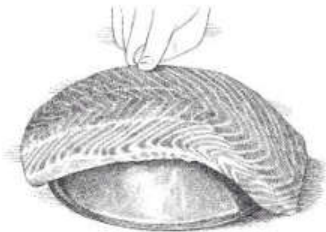


3. Unfold foil. Place shield over pie and crimp lightly to hold it in place before returning pie to oven.

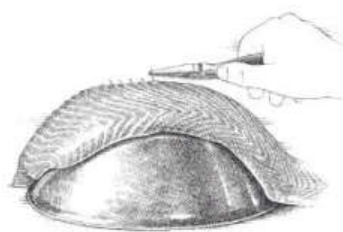


TECHNIQUE | REMOVING PINBONES FROM SALMON

When a fish is filleted, the flesh is removed from the backbone and ribs, but the relatively soft, thin, needle-like pinbones, also known as intermuscular bones, are not attached to the main skeleton and thus must be removed in a second step. While most fish are sold with the pinbones removed, they are difficult to see and are sometimes missed by the fishmonger. When preparing recipes like our Miso-Marinated Salmon (page 18), it's always a good idea to check for bones before cooking. —A.P.



1. Drape fillet over inverted mixing bowl to help any pinbones protrude. Then, working from head end to tail end, locate pinbones by running your fingers along length of fillet.



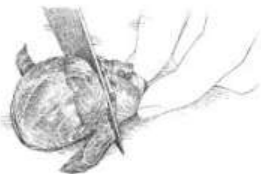
2. Use tweezers to grasp tip of bone. To avoid tearing flesh, pull slowly but firmly at slight angle in direction bone is naturally pointing rather than straight up. Repeat until all pinbones are removed.

Use a Bowl for Simpler Seasoning

When seasoning meat before cooking, we normally lay the pieces on a baking sheet, sprinkle the salt over them in an even layer on one side, and then flip them over and repeat on the second side. This is fine for larger cuts like whole chicken breasts or steaks, but it is tedious when working with smaller pieces, like cutlets or meat for stir-fry. In this case—as we found when developing our Better Chicken Marsala recipe (page 7)—it is far easier, more efficient, and just as effective to place the meat in a bowl, add the salt, and then toss thoroughly to distribute the salt evenly over the meat. —A.J.

TECHNIQUE | SPEEDIER BRUSSELS SPROUTS PREP

We prefer to thinly slice 1½ pounds of sprouts for Brussels Sprout Salads (page 11) by hand rather than use a food processor, since its blades tend to cut the leaves unevenly. We've found it most efficient to complete one task at a time on all the sprouts and use an assembly line setup on the cutting board. In fact, employing this approach made some cooks more than 30 percent faster at the task. —L.L.



1. TRIM GENEROUSLY

Trim base from sprouts, cutting high enough so that each sprout is roughly as tall as it is wide. This will allow tough outer leaves to fall away; pull off and discard any that remain.



2. HALVE

Pile trimmed sprouts at one end of board. Cut each in half, pushing halved sprouts to opposite end of board.



3. SLICE

Divide cutting board into three regions: keep halved sprouts at one end near nondominant hand, reserve center for slicing, and pile shredded sprouts on remaining third of board.



SCIENCE | When to Treat Chicken: Before or After Freezing?

Brining or salting chicken before cooking not only seasons the meat but also subtly changes its protein structure, which enables it to retain more moisture as it cooks. We know that many of our readers buy poultry in bulk and freeze it for later use, so we wondered: Is there any advantage to treating chicken prior to freezing and, if so, which method is preferable?

EXPERIMENT

We soaked three boneless, skinless chicken breasts in brine for 45 minutes, sprinkled three others with salt and let them rest for 1 hour, and left nine breasts untreated before freezing all of the samples for one week. After thawing the samples, we brined three and salted three of the previously untreated ones. We then cooked the chicken breasts using a *sous vide* machine and measured their moisture loss by comparing their cooked weight to their original weight prior to treating and freezing.

RESULTS

We found that salting the chicken before freezing worked best, resulting in chicken that was well seasoned and that lost only 11 percent of its weight when cooked (the samples that were brined before freezing lost 15 percent). Chicken that was salted or brined after thawing did not fare as well, losing 16 and 20 percent of its weight, respectively. The frozen chicken that was never treated lost 22 percent of its original weight.

METHOD	TIME FRAME	MOISTURE LOST
salting	before freezing	11%
	after freezing	16%
brining	before freezing	15%
	after freezing	20%
no salt or brine	n/a	22%

EXPLANATION

Treating the chicken before freezing works better than after because it gives the salt additional time to do its job—while the meat is freezing and then again while it is thawing. Salting the chicken before freezing works better than brining since salting creates a more concentrated brine at the surface of the meat, allowing more salt to travel into the meat. A higher concentration of salt within the meat allows it to hold onto more moisture (up to a point, at least; concentrations above a certain amount can actually have a negative effect).

TAKEAWAY

Salting chicken breasts before freezing is the best choice for well-seasoned meat that will retain the maximum amount of moisture. And happily, salting a bulk batch of chicken breasts before freezing is also more convenient than salting each smaller batch after thawing. To do it, sprinkle both sides of the chicken breasts with kosher salt (1½ teaspoons per pound) and refrigerate for one hour so that the salt can do its job. Pat dry, wrap, and freeze. —A.G.

SCIENCE OF COOKING: The Secrets of Seasoning Meat

Should you sprinkle your pork chop and turkey breast with the same amount of salt? Not if you want them to taste right. Free for 4 months at CooksIllustrated.com/dec15.



EQUIPMENT CORNER

➤ BY HANNAH CROWLEY, LISA McMANUS, LAUREN SAVOIE & KATE SHANNON ➤



HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

CILIO
Champagne Bottle
Sealer
Model: C300888
Price: \$7.50



HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

PREPWORKS
Collapsible Party Carrier
Model: BCC-4
Price: \$23.81



RECOMMENDED

NINJA
Nutri Ninja Pro
Model: BL450
Price: \$89.00



RECOMMENDED

THERMOWORKS
Pro-Series High Temp Air
Probe and Stainless Steel
Grate Clip
Model: TX-1003X-AP
Price: \$17.00



RECOMMENDED

CUISINART
MultiClad Pro Stainless
3½-Quart Sauté Pan
with Helper and Cover
Model: MCP33-24HN
Price: \$78.13

TESTING Champagne Savers

Champagne savers promise to keep champagne and sparkling wine fresh for anywhere from three days to a few months (a week would be plenty to us). We tested six (\$4.44 to \$35.00), pouring a glass and a half from six bottles of sparkling wine, sealing them with the savers, and storing them in the refrigerator. We tasted them daily against a freshly opened bottle, one we sealed with just plastic wrap and an elastic band, and a bottle we left entirely open. One model did such a poor job that the wine saved with it tasted almost as flat as the open bottle after a day. Three other sealers (and the plastic wrap) kept wines reasonably drinkable for two days. But the standout model, the Cilio Champagne Bottle Sealer (\$7.50), featured an easy-to-use, airtight seal that kept the contents just as lively as a newly opened bottle for two days and perfectly acceptable for a third. Even better, in a separate test where we didn't open the bottle daily, the wine stayed fresh for a week. —H.C.

TESTING Pie Carriers

Traveling with a delicate pie can feel like tempting fate, but a good pie carrier can make the task easier and more secure. We tested five models (\$11.88 to \$25.99)—a pair of basic pie-shaped plastic containers and three handled carriers—by loading the carriers with a variety of shallow double-crust pies and taller cream-topped pies, walking with them around the block, and driving with them down 3 miles of bumpy roads.

The simple plastic containers were too shallow to fit anything taller than a 2-inch-high apple pie without crushing the top crust. These pies also slid around recklessly on the carriers' wide, slippery bases, damaging the crusts' delicate edges. Handled carriers were more secure and easily transportable with one hand. The best model, the Prepworks Collapsible Party Carrier (\$23.81), sported a large, non-skid base that kept pies of all diameters perfectly stable and a tall dome that accommodated a lofty meringue topping. —L.S.

TESTING Personal Blenders

A full-size blender is a must for large-batch cooking, but “personal blenders” offer smaller footprints, lower price tags, and lids that allow them to transition from pitchers to travel cups when making smoothies and shakes. To see if any are worth owning in addition to a full-size blender, we evaluated nine models (\$16.99 to \$89.00) with pitchers sized 24 ounces and smaller, using them to blend smoothies with hard frozen berries and fibrous kale, thick milkshakes, and Green Goddess dressing.

Skinny pitchers were generally harder to fill and struggled to incorporate ingredients more than gently tapered U-shaped models did; the only downside of the

wider shape is that they don't fit in most standard cup holders. Longer blades (the best were at least 1½ inches) sporting at least four sharply angled prongs were better able to grab and process ingredients. Travel lids were a necessity, and we preferred spouts that were wide enough for thick liquids to flow through and snapped shut with a tight seal.

Our favorite, the Ninja Nutri Ninja Pro (\$89.00), encompassed all these traits with results as smooth as those from our full-size Best Buy blender, The Hemisphere Control from Breville (\$199.99). It was also the quickest at blending, which compensated for the fact that users must continuously hold down the pitcher to engage the motor, and it excelled in our 100-smoothie and 100-milkshake abuse tests. While not a necessity, it might be worth shelling out for if you're a smoothie enthusiast. —K.S.

UPDATE ChefAlarm Digital Thermometer

While evaluating oven thermometers (page 26), we discovered that the ThermoWorks ChefAlarm (\$59.00), our favorite digital probe thermometer for meat, deep frying, and candy making, offers an alternative to the dial-face models we tested. The company sells a separate ambient temperature probe (\$17.00), which connects to the thermometer and tracks the temperature of the oven. The probe clipped easily to the grate and was accurate to within a single degree. We also like that the remote thermometer, with its large digital display and intuitive user interfaces, allows you to easily check the oven temperature without opening the door. If you already own a ChefAlarm, it's an excellent alternative to our winning dial-face model from CDN, the Pro Accurate (\$8.70). —K.S.

UPDATE Cuisinart Sauté Pan

Our 2012 Best Buy sauté pan from Cuisinart was recently redesigned; the new model features squared-off handles made of stainless steel that resist heating up on the stovetop. When we compared the updated and the older pans, we found the new handle design easier to grip without slipping. Other than that, the pans were still similar: Both models browned equally well (though the new pan retains the old model's too-narrow cooking surface) and felt nicely balanced for easy lifting and pouring. We recommend the updated model, the Cuisinart MultiClad Pro Stainless 3½-Quart Sauté Pan with Helper and Cover (\$78.13), as our new Best Buy. —L.M.

For complete testing results, go to CooksIllustrated.com/dec15.

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RECIPE VIDEOS

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REVIEW VIDEOS

Science of Cooking: The Secrets of Seasoning Meat
Oven Thermometers

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Peanut Butter



Black & White



Hermit



Oatmeal
Raisin



Jam
Thumbprint



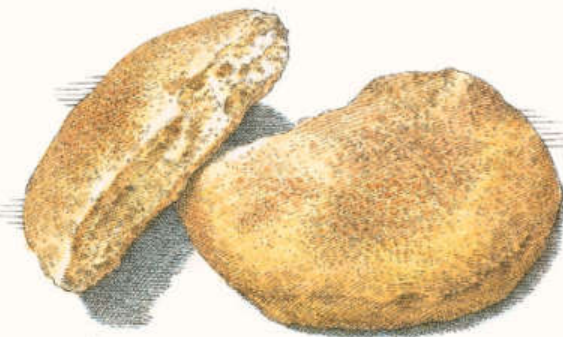
Graham
Cracker



Molasses



Chocolate
Sandwich



Snickerdoodle

Chocolate
Chip



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